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THE ®

saint
MYSTERY MAGAZINE

Edited by LESLIE CHARTERIS

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SOME OLD, SOME NEW — THE FINEST IN MYSTERY FICTION

If by now you are convalescing from some of the medico-legal twists I tried to con you into last month, you might like to have a relapse on some easier teasers involving no metaphysical paradoxes or futuristic postulates. Let us toy with a simple factor that must be established by any prosecution that hopes to get into court: *Where was the crime committed?*

Suppose you stood on one side of a frontier and shot a man standing on the other side. Where was the murder committed? Where you pulled the trigger or where the bullet hit him?

Was the crime committed when you started the bullet on its lethal trajectory? But the mere act of shooting *at* a man is not a murder. You might only wound him slightly, or miss him altogether. Therefore there was no murder before he was actually killed. Can it be argued *ex post facto* that you killed him when you pulled the trigger, merely because the bullet happened to hit him later?

More than 30 years ago, on a hiking trip across Europe, I came upon a spot where the treaty-makers of 1919 had drawn a boundary line between Belgium and Germany so brilliantly that a German road, going nowhere in Belgium, curved for a half mile or so across Belgian soil before veering back into Germany, while a Belgian railroad going nowhere in Germany took a similar swerve through German territory; and so help me, the railway and the highway crossed right on the frontier, according to my map. I stood in the intersection with my feet well apart, and thought (having even then published a few books, and being already addicted to such irritating speculations): "Now where would they say I was, if I shot someone from here? Especially if the other guy was also straddling all these frontiers, and I carefully shot right down the center line?"

I do not pretend that that was anything but a highly theoretical problem. But the passenger-carrying jets which are regularly screaming all over the world (but which weren't even on the drawing-boards in those days) can make the riddle much more straightforward and less farfetched — and even more interestingly intricate. Remember that in the good old uncomplicated days a ship on the high seas was regarded as an extension of the country whose flag it flew, for the "high seas" were open space as it was then understood. But planes fly over land, and every country claims sovereignty over the air space above it, out to still undetermined limits of accessibility. Remember also that even conservative doctors no longer recognize "instantaneous" death from anything much less than being at the center of a great explosion.

So in a scheduled commercial airliner, you could shoot at a man over France, hit him over Switzerland, and have him die over Italy. In a British plane, maybe. Then who gets to try you, an inoffensive American tourist?

Don't write and ask me. Pick on your own lawyer.

Cecil Charlton

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WORLD'S ONLY PRIZE PUZZLE CLUB
PRIZES EVERY MONTH — TO MEMBERS ONLY

the prodigal miser

by Leslie Charteris

THE SAINT THOUGHT HE KNEW EVERY GET-RICH SCHEME THAT EVER PLUCKED A PIGEON. BUT THIS WAS THE FIRST ONE THAT SEEMED TO PAY OFF.

CONTRARY TO THE belief of many inhabitants of less rugged climes, the sun really does sometimes shine in England, though it is admittedly a fickle phenomenon which imparts a strong element of gambling to the planning of any outdoor activity. But when it shines, perhaps because familiarity never has a chance to breed satiety, it seems to have a special beauty and excitement which is lacking in the places where sunny days are commonplace.

It was on one of those golden days in early autumn that Simon Templar drove out to Marlow, that pleasantly placid village on the Thames made famous by Izaak Walton, the first of all fishing pundits, in *The Compleat Angler*, to take Mrs. Penelope Lynch out to lunch. He had met her only a few days before, in London, at a small and highly informal party to celebrate the seventh anniversary of a couple who have no other part in this story; and when he found out where she lived there had been the inevitable comparing of notes

on places of interest in the neighborhood.

"Do you know my old pal Giulio Trapani at Skindle's?" he asked.

"Of course. We often used to go there. But for a smaller place, with more of country-pub atmosphere, do you know the King's Arms at Cookham?"

"No, but I've been to the Crown, where they have wonderful home-made pastries."

"Yes, I've had them. But one day you must try the steak-and-kidney pie at the King's Arms. Mrs. Baker makes it herself, and it's the best I know anywhere—if you like steak-and-kidney pie."

"I love it." This was a natural opening that could hardly be passed by. "Would you like to show it to me sometime?"

"Don't make that too definite, or you might find yourself stuck with it.

"How about next Sunday?"

"That would be perfect. In fact, since I'm a working girl, it's about the only day."

He guessed her age at about 26, and had learned that she was a widow—her husband had been the export manager of a manufacturing firm in Slough, who had taken an overdose of sleeping pills when he learned that he had lung cancer about six months ago. That was all he knew about her, aside from what his eyes told him, which was that she had short chestnut hair and a short nose, a wide brow and a wide mouth that smiled very easily, the ingredients combining into a gay gamin look which formed an intriguing counterpoint to her sensuously modelled figure. To a true connoisseur of feminine attractions, which the Saint candidly confessed himself to be, she had an allure that was far more captivating than most conventional forms of pulchritude, and that was rare enough to demand at least a better acquaintance.

She was ready when he arrived, in a tweed skirt and a cardigan over a simple blouse, and sensible suede shoes, and she said: "I'm glad you're early, because it'll give us time to walk over instead of driving. That is, if you won't think that's too frighteningly hearty. It's only about four miles."

"I'm glad to know you're so healthy," he grinned. "Most girls these days would think a fellow was an unchivalrous cad if he suggested walking around the block. But it's such a beautiful day, it'd be a shame not to take advantage of it."

Her house was near the southern end of the village, a tiled and half-timbered doll's-house with a walled garden that needed tidying but was still a carnival of color. They walked down a lane to the main road and across

the bridge, then took a secondary fork to the end of the flat land, hairpinned up through Quarry Wood, and then branched off the pavement altogether to follow a well-worn footpath that rambled along the side of the slope around Winter Hill. The leaves which had fallen into a carpet underfoot had left a myriad lacy openings in the canopy overhead through which the light came with fragmented brilliance, and the air was delicately perfumed with the damp scents of bark and foliage.

"Thank you for doing this," she said, after a while during which their flimsy acquaintance had been warming and easing through the exchange of trivialities not worth recording and the sense of companionship in sharing an uncomplicated pleasure. "I can see from your tan that you must be out of doors so much that you don't have to think about it, but it means a lot to me after being cooped up in an office all week."

"What sort of work do you do?"

"You'd never guess."

"Then I won't try."

"I'm secretary to a sort of horse-racing tipster. Or a kind of horse-playing service."

"That's certainly a bit out of the ordinary. How does it operate?"

"People give this man money to bet with, like an investment, and he sends them dividends from his profits."

"He really does?"

"Oh, yes. Every month."

And suddenly, in a flash, the pleasure of the walk was no longer uncomplicated. The air was the same, the loveliness of the leaf-tones and the dappled light were the same but something else had intruded that was as out of place there as a neon bulb.

"It sounds interesting," said the Saint cautiously. "Where do you do this?"

"In Maidenhead, which is quite convenient. Much better than having to go into London. And it came along just in time. When my husband died"—he liked the way she didn't hesitate before the word, or after it—"I was left practically broke, except for the cottage with the usual mortgage. He made a good salary, but we'd had a good time with it and hardly saved anything. And no insurance. It was when he went to take out a policy that they found out he had cancer. I thought I was going to have to sell the cottage and move into a little flat in town and look for a job here, which I'd've hated, so this was almost like a miracle."

"People always will believe in miracles, I suppose."

"Well, perhaps I'm exaggerat-

ing. It wasn't quite the same as hearing that I'd inherited a couple of million from some distant relative that I'd never heard of."

"Or winning the Irish Sweep, or one of those fabulous football pools. I guess those are the simplest fantasies that most people who aren't millionaires have played with at one time or another. What would rank after that? Messing around with an old bureau and finding a secret compartment full of jewels? Stumbling over a suitcase full of cash that some bank robbers had dropped during their getaway? But that wouldn't be so easy to be dishonest about as you might think, unless you were fairly well heeled already; somebody might get curious about how you became so rich overnight. No, I suppose some fast scheme to beat the stock market, the casinos, or the bookies, would be the next most popular get-rich-quick gimmick."

They walked on for a while in silence.

"What you're trying to say," she accused him at last, rather siffly, "is that you think I'm in something crooked."

"I don't say that you're an accomplice," he replied calmly. "But I'd want a lot of convincing that some day the police aren't going to be looking for your boss."

"That's what I've been afraid of," she said. "That's why I made Anne and Hilton promise to introduce us as soon as you came to England, when they happened to mention that they knew you."

He looked at her admiringly.

"A conniving female!" he said. "And I liked you so much because you never asked any of the usual silly questions about my life as the Saint and so forth."

"I was afraid if I did you'd be too leary of letting me get you alone."

"So you had this date all planned before you let me think I thought of it."

"Worse than that. I might have tried to drag you out on this walk even if it'd been pouring with rain."

The path had come down again from under the trees to curve inside the bend of the river. Ahead and to one side there were three green mounds that must have been ancient tumuli, and farther off yet the ridge of a railway embankment cut across a marshy stretch of lowland. From the place where Penelope Lynch stopped, pointing through a chance gap in an intervening coppice, could be seen close up against the embankment a wooden shack with a tar-paper roof, a rectangular box perhaps ten feet long which might once have been built to shelter a maintenance crew or their tools,

with a door at one end and a single small window in one side. It was occupied, Simon realized from a thin wisp of smoke that curled up from a stovepipe projecting through the roof; and as he gazed at it puzzledly, wondering why Penelope was showing it to him, a man came out with a bucket.

He wore a brown pullover and dark trousers loosely tucked into rubber knee-boots. He was broad-shouldered and a little paunchy, and he moved with the plodding deliberation of a farm laborer rather than a construction worker. At that distance, even the Saint's keen eyes could not make out much more than that he had plentiful gray hair and a ruddy complexion. He carried the pail a few yards from the hut, emptied it on the ground, and plodded back inside.

"My boss," Penelope said.

Simon had to hold back the stereotyped "You're kidding!" because it was perfectly obvious from her expression that she wasn't. Instead, he said with determined nonchalance: "It's nice to see a man who hasn't been spoiled by success, still living the simple life."

"He used to be our gardener," Penelope said.

The Saint clung doggedly to his composure.

"Democracy is a wonderful thing," he remarked, as they resumed their walk. "And you may get a medal from some bleeding-heart committee for being so cheerful about changing places. But not for your story-telling technique. I've heard of quite nice girls getting their pretty heads bashed in with blunt instruments because they tantalized someone a lot less than you've already done to me."

"All right," she said. "If you'll forgive me for trapping you like this. But I couldn't think of any other way to do it. It's such a fantastic story . . ."

It was.

It began when she told the gardener, whose name was Tom Gull, that she couldn't afford to keep him on any longer, and that in any case she was going to have to put the house on the market and move away.

This was nothing like casting a faithful old retainer out to starve, for he only came one day a week, and served five other houses within a few miles' radius on the same basis. She had known nothing else about him except that he had knocked on the door one morning and announced that the garden looked as if it needed attention and he had a day to spare. He was unkempt and unshaven and smelled strongly of beer, but in those days gardeners were as hard to find as any other house-

hold help, and after a trial she had let him become a weekly fixture. He was not exactly an artist at his craft, nor did he ever risk injuring himself from over-exertion, but he was better than nothing, and both she and her husband were glad to be relieved of some chores for which neither of them happened to have any inclination.

He took his dismissal phlegmatically, but at the end of the day he came back with a proposition.

"I've got somethink 'ere, ma'm," he said, extracting a grubby and much-folded piece of paper from his pocket. "It needs correcting my spelling an' putting in good English, an' typing out neat an' proper. I know you've got a typewriter, 'cos I've 'eard you using it. Do you think you could 'elp me out?"

"Of course, I'll be glad to," she said, feeling some kind of obligation because of the employment she had just taken away from him.

"I wouldn't ask you to do it for nothink," he said. "You fix it up for me, an' I'll give you a bit more work in the garden."

She had protested that that wasn't necessary, but after she had done the job she was not so sure.

As deciphered and edited by her, the document finally ran:

YOU CAN BEAT THE BOOKIES:

But by not studying the form book! The professionals who set the handicaps are much better at that than you, and in theory they should make every race end in a dead heat, but how often do they do it?

And not by following "information"! Who knows what secret plans have been made for *every* horse in a race?

The only method which can show a steady profit in the long run is a coldly mechanical mathematical method which will scientifically eliminate the element of chance. In other words, A SYSTEM.

Now, I know there are dozens of systems on the market, but it should be obvious that none of them can really be any good. If it were, the news would finally get around, and everybody would be using it, and all the bookies would be broke.

But after a lifetime of study I have developed and tested and proved a system which *is* infallible—which points out winner after winner, week after week, after week, year after year.

Obviously, this system is not for sale. Even if I charged £100 for it, somebody would buy it and turn around and sell copies to 200 other people for £5 each, and I should be left out in the cold.

I dare not even disclose the names of the horses indicated by the System, because after studying them for a while someone else might be clever enough to deduce the method by which they were found. And in any case, if people all over the country were backing these horses and telling their friends, the prices would come down until they all started at odds on, and there would be nothing in it for anybody.

What I will do is operate the System myself for a limited number of clients who will invest in units of £100 with me, to be staked entirely at my discretion, from which I GUARANTEE to pay monthly dividends of £5 per unit

Where else can you buy such an income at such a price?

Don't delay! Send me your CASH today!

TOM GULL
116 WATKINS STREET,
MAIDENHEAD, BERKS,

The Saint read it as it appeared in print, on a page torn from the *Sportsman's Guide* which she gave him, and was profoundly awed

"I've seen some fancy boob-bait in my time," he said, "but this is about the most preposterous pitch I think I've ever come across Don't tell me that anyone actually falls for it."

"They've been doing it ever since the first advertisement came out."

It was she who had found the one-room office and furnished it, on Gull's insistence that the service was worth a good week's pay and that he would have to get someone to do it in any case

"Ain't no use me going to see the agents," he said. "The way I look an' the way I talk, they wouldn't want to rent me anythink. An' I don't know wot you oughter 'ave in an office to run this job proper. But I can pay for it." He dug into his trousers and brought out a fistful of crumpled currency. "'Ere—take this, an' let me know if you need any more. I got a bit put away, wot I bin saving up till I was ready to start this business."

"If your system is so perfect, why don't you just work it for your own benefit?" she argued.

"Because it needs plenty o' capital, more 'n I could save up," he said seriously. "You got to 'ave reserves to see you through the losing runs, but if you keep going you can't 'elp winning in the end. So I got to 'ave share-'olders, just like Woolworth's."

When the office was ready and the first advertisements had been placed, he had worked up to his culminating offer.

"I got to 'ave someone in the office answering letters an' all that. I wouldn't be much good

at that meself, an' besides I better 'ang on to me gardening jobs till I se 'ow many share'olders I get. An' after that I'll 'ave to be going to the races or the betting shops every day, making the bets."

"But suppose you don't get any answers?"

"Then we pack up an' go 'ome. That's my little gamble. But we'll worry about that when it 'appens. I know you got to find a job, an' if you ain't too proud to take my money I'd be much obliged if you'd give it a try."

She had finally consented, not without a guilty feeling that she was helping him to throw away the last of his life's savings, but justifying herself with the thought that since he was stubbornly determined to go through with it she might as well take the job as let anyone else have it. She never dreamed that there would be such a response as she found herself coping with.

In the first week, five of the coupons which concluded the advertisement were returned, each accompanied by £100 in cash. In the second week there were ten, and Tom Gull went with her to a bank and opened an account. In the third week she banked £1600, and Mr. Gull showed up with a shave and a clean shirt and announced that he was going to begin working his System. The following Friday, after she banked another £1400 for that week, he came in smelling more strongly of liquor and pulling packages of five-pound notes from every pocket.

"Not a bad start," he said. "Now we got to do something about paying them dividends."

He turned down her suggestion of writing checks, on the grounds that since their investments had been made in cash they were entitled to dividends in the same form, and that some people in such circumstances as he had been in himself not long ago might have difficulty in cashing a check. He had her address envelopes to all the subscribers, in which he would put the fivers they were entitled to, and which he would take to the post office himself.

"Not that I don't trust you," he said. "But if I post 'em meself, if there's ever any question, I can swear that everyone's bin paid."

So it had gone on ever since, with new investors enrolling at a rate of between twelve and twenty a week, besides additional £100 units sent in by presumably satisfied earlier subscribers. And each week Mr. Gull (as she was now used to calling him) displayed thick wads of winnings which he also allowed her to bank, except for what had to be set aside each month for

the payment of dividends, and the thousand pounds which he carried for "operating capital".

When she suggested that it would be safer for him to open credit accounts with bookmakers, he shook his head.

"Them chaps are all in league," he said darkly. "They'd soon catch on to wot I was doing, an' then they'd all close my accounts. They might even put me in 'ospital to get even. I make my bets on the courses, picking different bookies every time, or sometimes on the tote, or goin' around the betting shops in London—there's 'undreds of 'em to choose from, so nobody 'as a chance to get to know me."

The names and addresses of the subscribers were kept in a card index in the office, and also in a loose-leaf pocket address book which he bought himself and brought in twice a week for her to enter the latest additions. Against each of the names in this private list he made cryptic marks of his own. Altogether, there were now more than 200 members of this extraordinary syndicate, and a total of almost £30,000 had been invested. At which point Mr. Gull told her to stop the advertisements, and the flow of funds abruptly dried up.

"He told me it was as much as he could handle," Penelope said, "and if he had to make his bets any bigger he wouldn't be able to spread them around inconspicuously."

"And he still is betting?" Simon asked.

"Oh, yes. And he brought in some more winnings last week."

"Then why is he still living in that broken-down shanty?"

"He says it wouldn't be right for him to use the money that's been invested for anything else than it was given him for. And he wants to save all his own winnings till he can pay everyone back and have his own capital to work with."

"Penelope," said the Saint, "in spite of your unscrupulous methods, you've got me fascinated. But this has angles that need a bit of thinking about."

She refrained from pressing him until they were at table and the steak-and-kidney pie had been served. The first taste told him that it amply fulfilled her promise, and gratitude alone would have obliged him to give attention to her problem even if it had been less provocative than it was.

"Do you know what I call the Ponzi Routine?" he said. "It's one of the classical sucker-traps. You offer investors a fantastic return on their money, and for a while you actually pay it—long enough for them to spread the good word and get more and more suckers enrolled. Of course, the 'dividends' are coming out of

their own capital, but you can afford to pay out as long as new money is pouring in. It's been worked in all sorts of variations, but I call it the Ponzi in honor of the guy who may have been its most successful operator, who racked up several million dollars with it in America before I was around."

"But Mr. Gull *is* winning more than enough money to pay the dividends."

"That's one of the angles I was talking about, that don't fit. And wanting to stop the investments rolling in is another. And so is this business of not living it up himself, with all that dough in the bank. And even talking about paying it back."

"So you don't think I'm a complete idiot not to have gone to the police?"

"I can see why it might be a bit difficult. Your gardener hasn't done anything criminal yet. It isn't a crime to ask people to invest in any wildcat scheme, unless they can prove false pretenses. But under English law a man is innocent until he's proved guilty; and until Gull stops banking winnings or stops paying dividends, you'd have a job to prove false pretenses. Maybe you're doing the poor bastard a horrible injustice. Maybe he really has discovered an infallible system. But that's an awful lot to swallow."

"Is it impossible?"

Simon shrugged.

"I never heard of one yet. But lots of things are impossible until somebody does them. Like television, or rocket ships to Mars. I believe that some great scientists once proved that it was mathematically impossible for a helicopter to get off the ground. You can't convict a man of fraud because he claims to have discovered a trick that nobody could do before. Everything about Gull is still legitimate—until he falls on his face. And if and when that happens, he might be in South America—and you could have a tough time proving that you weren't an active confederate."

"That's why I thought it might be such a help if I could talk to you," she said.

The Saint scowled over his food, which was most unfair to it

"One of Ponzi's best ploys," he said, "was when the first rumor got around that his golden-egg factory was goosey, and a few hundred stockholders panicked and came yelling for their money back Ponzi produced sacks of bullion and cheerfully paid them off. The scare fizzled out, and in a few days more mugs than ever were begging him to accept their deposits."

"But nobody's asked Mr. Gull for their money back, yet."

"Exactly. And so far he's only talking about this voluntary pay-off. If it goes beyond talking, about this voluntary pay-off. If it goes beyond talking, it'll be something else to get quietly hysterical about. Meanwhile, I promise to lose some sleep over the contradictions you've given me already. I wish I could give you the answers right now, all gift-wrapped and tied up with ribbons, but the reports of my supernatural powers are slightly exaggerated. I'm only a human genius."

For the rest of the day he was nothing but human, but he repeated his promise before he left And it was not for lack of mental effort that a solution to the mystery of Mr. Gull continued to elude him. Some factor seemed to be missing which left all the questions open-ended, but he could not put his finger on it.

Then, on the followning Thursday, Penelope Lynch phoned him.

"Well," she said, "it's happened."

His heart sank momentarily.

"What has? He's skipped?"

"No. He's going to start giving the money back. He came in this morning and told me to write letters to the first five people who invested, saying that he's decided to close down his business, thanking them for their help and confidence, and enclosed please find their original hundred pounds. He says he's planning to pay off at least that many people every week from now on."

"This I have got to see more of," said the Saint. "I'll be down this afternoon."

He thoughtfully packed a bag and put it in his car, and drove to Maidenhead immediately after lunch.

The office was above a tobacconist and newsagent on a turning off the High Street. It was minimally furnished with a filing cabinet, a book-case which contained only boxes of stationery, and two desks, on one of which was a typewriter, behind which sat Penelope.

She showed him one of the letters which she had finished, but he was less interested in it than in the five envelopes she had prepared. He copied the addresses on a sheet of paper, and then asked to see the card index, but he could find nothing significant in the bare data on when their investments had been received and what dividends had been paid.

"Mr. Gull left his own book here this morning," she mentioned, and Simon recalled what she had said about the cryptic marks that Mr. Gull made on his own records.

He went carefully through the lists under each initial. Opposite

some of the typewritten names had been pencilled an "O", and opposite some others appeared an "X". There were very few X's —in fact, when he checked back, the total was only seven. He wrote these down also; but neither the names nor the addresses thus distinguished seemed to have any characteristic in common, at least on the surface. Only one of them happened to be among the five to whom the first refunds were going.

"You're not making out checks for these, either?" he asked.

"No. But they're to be registered, as you see."

"That's about all I can see," he said wryly. "If something doesn't click pretty soon, you're going to wonder how I ever got my reputation. And so am I . . . Now I'm going to beat it before he comes back, but I'll expect you for dinner at Skindle's. Will seven o'clock give you time to run home and change?"

When she arrived, and they ordered cocktails in the bar, she told him that Gull had come in at five, laden with more money, and had approved and signed the refund letters.

"Then he said I could go home, and he'd make up the refund packages and mail them himself, like he always did the dividends. He had time to do it and get to the post office before it closed."

"You didn't happen to hang around outside and see whether he made it?"

"I thought of it, but I got cold feet. I was afraid he might see me, and it might spoil something for you."

"Well, assuming that he did catch the mail, the letters should be delivered tomorrow morning. And I just think I'll check on that."

She was beginning to seem a little troubled.

"Perhaps there *is* nothing wrong after all, and I'm wasting your time like an old maid who thinks every man on the street at night is Jack the Ripper. If that's how it turns out, I'll want to shoot myself."

"Somehow, I'm sure you'll never turn out to be an old maid," he said cheerfully

"But if Mr. Gull really has a system—you said it was always possible—"

"It could still be just as dangerous. Perhaps I haven't been careful enough how I phrased some of the things I've said. There *are* theoretically infallible systems—but in practice they eventually blow up. For instance, it's a fact that about two out of five favorites win. So in theory, you only have to double your stake after each loser, and fairly soon you must hit a winner and show a net profit. According to you, Uncle Tom is a rather sim-

ple soul, and he may have figured this out in his little head and thought he'd discovered something like atomic energy. But the snag is that the average two-out-of-five is the end result of a lot of very erratic winning and losing runs. There are plenty of days when no favorites win at all. Now, suppose you started with a bet of ten pounds; doubling up, you bet twenty, forty, eighty, a hundred and sixty, then three hundred and twenty on the sixth race. The next day, you have to start off betting six hundred and forty, twelve hundred and eighty, twenty-five hundred and sixty, five thousand one hundred and twenty — and if that one wins at even money, you net exactly ten pounds. If it goes down, your next bet would be more than a hundred thousand—and where would you find the bookies to take it?"

"And I suppose there have been two days in a row without a winning favorite?"

"There have. Perhaps not often, but now and again they happen. I don't say that that's Uncle Tom's system, but it could be something along those lines. If so, he may have been lucky so far, but one day it's going to blow up with an almighty bang, as sure as there'll be a frost before summer."

"Then I only hope it lasts long enough for him to give everyone their money back."

"That'll take about ten months, on the present schedule," he said. "I don't think I can hold my breath that long."

It was hard enough for him to wait until after breakfast the next day and an hour at which the morning mail could be safely assumed to have been delivered and opened.

The one subscriber of the five earmarked for the first refunds who was also marked with an X on Mr. Gull's private list had an address in North London and a telephone number in the directory.

"This is the *Sportsman's Guide*," said the Saint, to the cantankerous elderly voice that answered. "We understand that you were a client of one of our advertisers, Mr. Tom Gull."

"That is correct."

"Mr. Gull tells us that he is going out of business and is refunding all investments. Has he notified you of that?"

"I received a letter to that effect this morning, enclosing my money."

Simon took a deep breath.

"Until then, did you receive your dividends regularly?"

"I did. It was a most satisfactory service. In fact, I think it's most inconsiderate of him to discontinue it so arbitrarily. But there you are. Nothing seems to have any stability these days."

"That's what comes of keeping horses in them," said the Saint sympathetically, and hung up .

Another of the five was also in the London directory, but the number did not answer.

The other three addresses were in Beaconsfield, Windsor, and Staines. It took some time to find out and connect with the next number through the hotel switchboard—he had taken a room at Skindle's to remain closer to the subject of his investigation—but when he introduced himself with the same formula, the response was startlingly different.

"I never heard of him."

"You *are* Mr. Eric Botolphome?"

"In a manner of speaking, yes."

"But you haven't had any dealings with Mr. Gull."

"I have not. And I never heard of your publication, either."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Botolphome," said the Saint slowly. "We must have been misinformed."

"The name," said his respondent plaintively, "is pronounced 'Boffam'."

"Congratulations," Simon said, and carefully cradled the handset again.

Scanning his lists, he realized that the process of having telephone numbers in a wide range of different towns researched and requested through the hotel switchboard and assorted exchanges would put a strain on the hotel operator and the lines at her disposal which would test her patience as much as his own. On the other hand, Windsor and Staines could both be reached in a single twelve-mile drive which might not take any more time and which would give a physical vent to his impatience—besides satisfying a foaming curiosity about the types who might or might not make up Mr. Gull's strange inventory of contributors.

He threw on a coat and ran downstairs and began driving.

The address in Windsor turned out to be a weathered brick villa on Vansittart Road built on stark Edwardian lines that harmonized excellently with the complexion and corseted contours of the beldam who finally opened the door.

"Tom Gull?" she croaked. "What does he do?"

"He runs a kind of betting service."

She cupped a hand to her ear. "Eh?"

"A kind of betting service."

"I don't need a vet. Haven't had any animals around since my last cat died."

"No, *betting*," Simon said, with increased projection. "You invest money with him, and he backs horses with it and sends

you the profits."

"Young man," said the matriarch crustily, "if I had my way, I'd see all the bookmakers hanged, like they used to hang people for sheep-stealing. All this betting and bingo, it's no wonder we can't stop the Russians occupying the moon. And people like you, trying to get customers for them, you're no better than they are."

She slammed the door in his face.

The nominee in Staines, a few miles further on, proved to be the proprietor of a small grocery store on the road out towards Laleham In a more genial way, he was no less definite

"Who, me? Not bloody likely. The *Guide's* all right, but some o' those advertisements make me laugh. I like to have a little bet sometimes, but I want to know what I'm puttin' my half-crown on. Anyone who'd send someone a hundred quid to play with, like that, must be a proper Charley, if you don't mind my sayin' so."

Simon went back to his car and studied his second list—the names which had been singled out with an X in Mr. Gull's personal register. Of the remaining six, one lived in Croydon, but the others were in Bournemouth, Worthing, Sevenoaks, Torquay, and Scarborough—a variety of respectable distances in too many different directions for it to be practicable to continue the investigation by personal visits.

He drove back to Skindle's, stopping on the way to buy a large and expensive box of chocolates, and hoping that the telephone operator had a sweet tooth and a sympathetic disposition.

Already he had an inkling of pattern, but it was not until that evening that he had finally succeeded in contacting all the names and proving it beyond peradventure.

"The ones wtih the crosses are all satisfied customers," he told Penelope. "The others are real live people too—or at least the four I'd jotted down—but every one of them denies having had anything to do with Brother Gull."

Her eyes were big and wide. "Why would they do that?"

"It could be because they're all ashamed to admit that they're secret gamblers. But I doubt it. I want to have another look at the original card index."

They went to the office after dinner, and he went through the cards one by one, confirming an impression which he had suddenly recalled that afternoon, during one of the waits between calls.

"Had you noticed that apart from the London addresses, which come up regularly, the

earliest replies all came from the south and west, and not too far away? Later on they get more varied—here's St. Albans, Cambridge, Clacton, Folkstone . . . But there isn't one of the 'O' names with an address as far away as Torquay or Scarborough."

"No, I hadn't," she said. "Would it be because people living a long way from London aren't so interested in racing?"

"Not that I ever heard. Who do you think goes to all those tracks in the North—and even in Scotland?"

"Yes, that was silly. But then, what *is* the answer?"

"I think we may have stumbled on a Communist conspiracy to ruin the capitalist countries by debasing their currency. Tom Gull is a mad scientist who has invented a molecular multiplier which makes three or four fivers out of one. The advertisement is a code which tells all the cell captains to send in as much cash as they can; after a while they get it back, but the Central Committee has built up a store of perfect duplicates ready to flood the international exchange. The 'O' names, of course, are the eggheads who are secretly cooperating in the scheme. The 'X' is a shorthand form of the hammer and sickle, and indicates the elite of the organization. Tom Gull's cabin is actually a camouflaged rocket pad—"

"And he's got the fuel buried in all the flower-beds he digs up. I know. There's somebody who writes books like that."

The Saint's smile was a silent laugh.

"Is Gull going racing again tomorrow?" he asked.

"He said he was going to Ascot again. He was there today."

"Good. Then it should be safe to have a closer look at that shack of his in the afternoon."

"Do you have a theory, really"

"It's such a wild one that I wouldn't dare tell you until I've proved it," he said. "Then if I'm wrong, you won't classify me with that writer. But invite me for cocktails tomorrow, and I may dazzle you with my brilliance."

He had one more call to make in the morning, to David Lewin of the *Express*, and before lunch he had the answer to a question which gave him considerably more confidence when he set out for Cookham.

He enjoyed a couple of pasties and a pint of bitter at the Crown, and left his car parked there when he left soon after two o'clock to retrace the riverside footpath to the railroad track.

He stood hidden at the edge of the thicket for a while, studying the hut. This time there was no smoke coming from the chim-

ney and no other sign of occupancy, but the only way to make finally sure of that was to go close enough to expose himself. He took a diagonal course that would lead him past it by at least fifteen yards, and studiously avoided any appearance of interest in it. Then when he was near enough he flashed a sidelong glance at the door without turning his head, and saw that there was a padlock in place which could not possibly have been fixed from inside.

He turned and went directly to it. The lock was a good one, but like many such installations it was betrayed by the hasp which it secured, which was fastened to the woodwork merely with four screws which offered no resistance to the screwdriver blade of the Saint's Swiss army pocket-knife. He put the screws in his pocket for future replacement, opened the door, and went in.

The interior, dimly lighted by the one grimy window, was stuffy with the mingled stalenesses of beer, smoke, and sweat. Gardening tools stood in three corners, and some soiled articles of clothing hung on hooks. A battered kettle and a dirty saucepan sat on the small black stove. There was a dresser with a stained and scarred top on which stood an enamel basin, a chipped cup and saucer, a couple of plates, some cheap flatware, and a can of beans. The only other furniture was an ancient armchair with the stuffing leaking through rents in the upholstery, and an iron bedstead with drab blankets carelessly heaped on a bare gray mattress.

If what he was looking for was there at all, there were not many places where it could be hidden. The dresser drawers yielded only a disorderly hodgepodge of clothing, canned food, old magazines, patent medicines, pieces of string and wire, and an empty gin bottle. Through the larger splits in the chair his probing fingers touched only springs and cotton batting. The mattress seams showed no signs of having been recently re-sewn. That left only the floor, which he checked board by board, until under the bed, when he moved it away from the wall, he found one that was loose and which came up easily.

From the hollow underneath he pulled out a stout canvas bag tied with a cord threaded through a row of grommets around the neck. Stencilled on one side were the words:

PETRIPLAST LTD.
SLOUGH.

The bag bulged with a load that was half-hard but springy. He loosened the cord plunged a hand in, and brought it out with

a mass of paper money, most of it fives.

A change in the intensity of light, rather than anything positively seen, made him turn and look up sharply.

Tom Gull stood in the doorway. It could have been no one else, in a suit that looked as if it had been slept in, but with a garish necktie knotted under a clean but threadbare collar. Tom Gull, dressed to go to the races, or to tell Penelope he was going, but already returned home instead. The untidy gray hair and ruddy face matched the impression that Simon had had from a distance. But at closer quarters it could be observed that the tint of cheeks and nose had not been produced by wind and sun without the assistance of internally administered colorants. The bear-like posture was the same, too, but not the speed with which he snatched up a pitchfork that leaned against the nearest wall.

"Hold it!" the Saint's voice crackled. "We mustn't get blood on it."

For an instant the man was thrown off his mental stride, and that was sufficient to check him physically. But the fork was still levelled at the Saint's chest, the tines gleaming wickedly sharp, poised on the whim of the gardener's powerful arm like an arrow on the string of a drawn bow.

"Wot you think you're doing 'ere?"

"I know all about this," Simon said urgently, trying to keep his precarious hold on the other's attention. He threw the bag down on the bed so that the lettering on it was uppermost. "About a year ago this was stolen from the train to High Wycombe—the payroll for the Petriplast branch factory there. I was checking this morning on what robberies there'd been in the neighborhood where a lot of cash disappeared that'd never been found. There was about thirty-two thousand pounds in this. The guard put up a fight, and the men on the train were caught, but not before they'd thrown the bag out of a window. It was believed that they had accomplices waiting beside the line who got away with it and left them to take the rap, though they swore they didn't. I know what really happened. You were moseying around on your way to the local, and you stumbled over the bag and picked it up."

"Put down the rest of it," Gull growled.

Simon obeyed, slowly, and went on talking.

"Why don't you offer me a deal? Maybe a partnership in your horse-playing business? It's

your only out, unless you want to kill me and bury me in the—"

Suddenly he realized that his improvisation, playing for time, had led him into a trap of its own. He had said the wrong thing to a man of Gull's limited but literal mentality. He saw it in the reddish glitter in the gardener's eyes, a tightening of the mouth and a tensing of muscles, and knew that in the flick of another thought he would feel the steel in his flesh.

From behind Gull came a short shrill scream.

It distracted him just enough, at the very moment when he was starting his lunge, for the Saint to leap in under the pitchfork, deflecting the shaft with his left arm, while his right fist drove like a piston into the man's solar plexus, doubling him forward to meet the standard left uppercut that followed.

"Jolly good," said Penelope. "I'm not the screaming type, honestly, but it was the only way I could think of to help."

"It was the one great brainstorm of his life," Simon said later. "Having picked up all that loot and hidden it, he was faced with the problem of getting to use it. You can't walk into a bank and open an account with thirty-two thousand in cash without questions being asked. And you can't even start spending money like a Greek ship-owner, if you've been known for years as a slob who only worked hard enough to earn the wherewithal to keep slightly sozzled, without people talking, and pretty soon the cops hear about it. And if you tried to disappear and start somewhere else under another name, they'd soon be looking for you, remembering that you'd been in the vicinity when all that legal tender got lost. He had to find a way to legitimize it, or build a complete set-up to account for how he got it."

"So he just sent himself the money and filled out his own coupons," Penelope said. "I suppose he picked names and addresses from the phone books in different towns, because it was easier than inventing them."

"And then he began producing the rest of the money as winnings. And when he had you address envelopes for the dividends, he just took them home and burned them. The same with those refund letters. The money that should have gone in them would just be produced as more winnings, and gradually he could claim they were all his."

"But what about the man who said he really had had his dividends and his money back?"

"Frightening as it seems, there actually were seven suckers who sent in a hundred pounds of their own money. They were the ones marked with crosses in

his private book. He had to keep track of them, and let them be paid, so that there wouldn't be any complaints that would get him investigated."

"How can people be so gullible?"

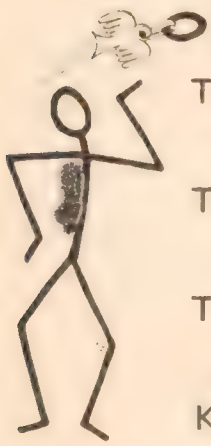
"You've invented a word. But don't forget that you went along with the gag for some time before you began to wonder if anything was wrong."

"And don't forget that if I hadn't decided to do some detecting on my own, since you were being so superior and mysterious, and followed him this afternoon, you'd 've been stuck on his fork like a hot dog."

The Saint shuddered.

"Let's say you earned at least half the reward." He poured two more Peter Dawsons. "Do you think we should go out and celebrate, or just stay here by the fire?"

NEXT MONTH –



THE MAN WHO HATED AMELIA JONES
by EDGAR WALLACE

THE LIVING END
by ROBERT BLOCH

THE SILVER SPOONS
by MIRIAM ALLEN deFORD

THE RED ROSE OF DEATH
by WENZELL BROWN

KEEPING LIVESTOCK HEALTHY
by AVRAM DAVIDSON

THE SIMON TEMPLAR FOUNDATION
by LESLIE CHARTERIS

and

STORY TO BE WHISPERED

A NEW STORY by CORNELL WOOLRICH

–in the May issue of THE SAINT MYSTERY MAGAZINE

---

serpent wind

by Sax Rohmer

Bimbashi Baruk was passing the club shortly before midnight on his way to his Cairo hearquarers when he decided to turn in there for a drink. He had the bar to himself except for young Cardew of H.Q. and a civilian whom he didn't know. In these circumstances it was unavoidable that he should overhear a conversation which had the most remarkable consequences. The behavior of Dick Cardew, who would have been Army middleweight champion if he had learned to curb his temper, was so wholly unpredictable that when, tersely excusing himself to his friend, and bidding the Bimbashi good night, he dashed out, he left the bimbashi troubled in mind; so much so that he determined to follow. He liked Cardew and he sensed some trouble brewing.

There was a nearly full moon, and as he drove across the bridge Bimbashi Baruk noted that the sky was a dirty blue.

Tens of thousands will no doubt carry with them to the grave the certainty that the Chinese sections in any large city, in San Francisco or anywhere you may mention, are nests of opium dens, with Dr. Fu Manchu's agents waiting patiently to pounce up the unsuspecting . . . Sax Rohmer of course wrote other stories (as readers of this magazine know) which were the direct antithesis of these more well-known contributions to the folk-myths of our times. . . . H.S.S.

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But he had come within sight of his destination before, proclaimed by a furious lashing of palm fronds, the hot wind ("Khamsin" or "Serpent Wind") burst in all its fury.

He saw as he reached the gates of the villa that a number of cars were being driven away. Guests anxious to reach home hurried past in a darkness almost complete, and the wind howled like demoniac voices of a hundred devils.

Double glazed doors were draped and a lobby beyond was dimly lighted. An Egyptian servant greeted him.

"Is Captain Cardew here?" the bimbashi asked rapidly in Arabic.

"Yes, sir. At least, I have not seen Yuzbashi Cardew go."

The bimbashi passed on. He did not know Mrs. Yardley Etherton well, although he had received an invitation to her buffet party now so hurriedly dispersing. Young and attractive wife of an elderly U.S. diplomat, she was one of those women who mean no harm but who manage to do a lot.

Of course, it was possible that Cardew had left unobserved by the servant. However, the bimbashi determined to seek out Mrs. Yardley Etherton. He walked along a carpeted corridor.

As he passed a door ajar, that of an apparently unlighted room, Bimbashi Baruk pulled up sharply. Above the wailing of the wind he had heard, coming from this room, another sound—a woman's scream, a babble of words, upon which ensued sudden silence.

Seized by an unpleasant premonition, he pushed the door open and looked into the room. As he had supposed, it was in darkness, but he groped for and found a switch so that a standard lamp became lighted. The room, furnished as a study, was empty. He crossed the room to a window. Light from the standard lamp, shining dimly out onto the terrace, showed him the figure of a man lying outstretched not more than three feet from where he stood. Blood poured from a deep head wound.

In the adjoining room, someone had started a gramophone, and they were dancing . . . .

These were the circumstances which led to the awakening of Commandant Hatton of the Cairo police. Hatton was formerly attached to the C.I.D.

"This is not my idea of clean, healthy fun," he remarked.

A clock struck two. Hatton, seated in the villa study, looked up from his notes. A big man, fresh-colored, with close-cut silver-gray hair and a small mustache resembling a midget curry-

comb, his light blue eyes had outlived a happy childhood.

"I am more than a little bothered, myself," Bimbashi Baruk admitted. "We have sturdy lying to deal with."

Hatton nodded. "Yes," he said, "your notes convince me of that."

The facts embodied in Hatton's notes were bizarre and confusing. They were these:

The man discovered by Bimbashi Baruk, when dragged into the study had proved to be dead. Neither host or hostess being discoverable (it was learned later that Yardley Etherton was away from Cairo), the bimbashi had taken charge. A doctor was summoned, the police were notified, and guests still on the premises were asked to remain. The victim had a skull wound behind his right ear and a severe laceration of the jaw.

The doctor estimated the dead man, tall and of handsome presence, to have been about thirty-five. His few possessions gave no clue to his identity.

"We can reasonably suppose," said Hatton, "that he was a stranger to Cairo. Not because nobody has admitted to recognizing him, but because he wears a borrowed dress suit with no label. Short of hotel valets—who generally have a few on hand—places where he might have borrowed it are limited."

Following a spell of silence—

"I think," said Bimbashi Baruk, "that we may accept the evidence showing that Mrs. Yardley Etherton, finding her party dispersing, joined friends with whom she drove into Cairo."

"Yes. Her slogan is, 'Don't break up the party.'"

"It is not clear to me, though, of the four guests who remain, why one was detained."

"Adrienne Arlen?"

"Yes." Bimbashi Baruk's eyes grew dreamy.

"First, her behavior when she viewed the body."

"H'm—perhaps. No sensitive woman enjoys looking at a bloodstained corpse."

"Then, you observed, no doubt, that she carrier a handbag with initials in diamonds?"

"I had noted the fact." The bimbashi's drooping eyelids were raised momentarily. "These initials, although she hides them rather cleverly, are J.F."

"Exactly. Either she has given a false name—"

"Or borrowed the bag."

There was a rap on the door.

"Come in," said Hatton.

The door opened and Cardew entered.

"Sorry if I seem to butt in, Hatton—but might I have a private chat with Major Baruk?"

"Certainly; by all means."

Hatton went out, quietly closing the door. Bimbashi Baruk took the seat just vacated and began to fill his pipe. "Try the armchair, Cardew," he said. "It looks restful."

Cardew crossed to the chair but did not sit in it; he sat on one arm, facing the bimbashi. Of no more than medium height, Richard Cardew was a man powerfully built; his dark brown hair grew in small, tight waves and his gray eyes had sometimes been described as dangerous. If his jaw was a shade too heavy, a shy smile betrayed a sensitive nature: only a fool could have doubted his spirit and integrity.

"I want to get this thing clear if I can," he began steadily, "for I find the present situation intolerable. . . . When I gave my evidence, there was one small point which I withheld. You will understand when I explain."

Bimbashi Baruk lighted his pipe. "Suppose you start from the club," he suggested. "I could not avoid overhearing your conversation, a fact which explains why I came out. I heard a man tell you that he had just come from one of Mrs. Etherton's affairs at Gezira and that Lady Avalon Westry was there. Go ahead from that point."

"I will," said Cardew grimly. "What you evidently didn't hear was his description of the behavior of the man with whom he had seen her. I was rather staggered."

"Why?"

"Well, you see Avalon had called me earlier in the evening to say that she felt rather under the weather and was going to turn in. I never cared a lot for Nan Etherton, but she and Val were at the same finishing school in France, and I suppose there's no real harm in the woman. When I arrived, there was every sign of a big storm blowing up, and the crowd was dismissing. I saw Peter Malmsey — Nan Etherton's tame boy friend—and he told me that Val was still here. Nan had joined the Farquharsons and had pushed over to Cairo. Peter was acting as deputy host."

"What did you do?"

"I went to look for Val."

"And did you find her?"

"Yes. Now, I told Hatton that she was talking to a man whom I couldn't see clearly, just outside this room."

"I remember."

"From the garden, I saw them come out. The breeze was rising and people were already dashing away. Well, she and the man went along the terrace toward the steps. I lost sight of them."

"This tallies with what you

told Hatton. Which is the part you wish to correct?"

"Well, when the surgeon had finished and we were asked to view the body, I said that I didn't know the man. In a sense, this was true . . . but he is the man Val was talking to!"

Bimbashi Baruk's expression grew grim. "I understand your former—reticence, Cardew. Avalon had already denied that she knew him."

Cardew dropped into the armchair and ran his fingers through tight waves of hair. "Exactly? That's the devil of it. What could I do then?"

"The more urgent question is, what are you going to do now? Have you had it out with her?"

Cardew shook his head almost savagely. "She is highly strung, as you know, and at the moment on the verge of hysteria. It is painfully clear that Hatton, after a short interrogation, allowed everybody to go except Avalon, myself—and some woman I had never seen before. Peter Malmsey stayed as representative of the hostess. Since he can't suspect Peter, what am I to infer?"

Peter Malmsey was one of those young men who are well connected and something at a ministry; It was true that nobody could suspect Peter.

"The simple fact is, Cardew, that in the eyes of criminal law no man's unsupported word is worth anything at all. Hatton regards Miss Arlen's evidence as unsatisfactory, and Avalon told him she was hunting for her car when I called on everyone to return. Unfortunately, she hunted alone. You said you were looking for Avalon. But you see, Cardew, no one saw you looking for her."

"But Avalon—"

"Leave Avalon to me," said the bimbashi, quietly. "Just keep out of the way."

"You are not going to tell her—"

"It is unnecessary that I should refer to our conversation."

Avalon Mary Westry, only daughter of the Marquis of Derringham, was tall, slight and delicately fair: to have described her as a blonde would have been coarse. She legitimately prompted the simile of a lily with her cool white skin and pale golden hair. Her eyes were calmly blue, and upon certain men her presence acted like fumes of hashish, so keen was the desire which she provoked.

This circumstance had caused her parents no small concern, since more than one scandal had been narrowly averted. When Dick Cardew came along (unlike her other suitors, he was unattached, wealthy and in

every way eligible), an early marriage was urged by Avalon's anxious mother.

Avalon, however, had proved difficult; she declined to permit any announcement. But when Dick Cardew left for Egypt, Avalon saw him off—and broke down hopelessly as the train pulled out. Some months later, during the time that she was employed in the Ministry of Supply, information reached her father concerning yet another scandal about to bloom, and the historic "Westry jaw" of the marquis (delicately inherited by his daughter) became set in two right-angle triangles. Her health demanded sun and a dry climate: Lady Avalon was sent out to her aunt in Cairo. She went gladly, for Dick Cardew was there; but up to the time of the villa tragedy, no engagement had been reported. . . .

The puff of khamsin having extinguished itself with its own violence, a nearly full moon held her Isis mirror above that land of Egypt in which the ancient gods were dying. Lady Avalon and Bimbashi Baruk leaned on a low stone parapet looking down at the muddy Nile.

She wore a white lace frock, with a sort of cowl which she had drawn over her hair, creating an effect similar to that of a mantilla; she appeared almost immortally ethereal. From a boat somewhere upstream, borne upon a faint breeze come monotonous strains of a reed pipe.

"You see, Major" — Avalon's voice was low-pitched but peculiarly clear—"I am one of those unfortunate people who are always found out. I don't truly believe I have ever done anything desperately bad, but whatever I do, right or wrong, it inevitably comes to light." She paused. "Now, when everything was coming right, this thing happens."

"You didn't expect Cardew to be here?"

"Oh, no!"

The bimbashi studied Avalon's pure profile. "I am afraid," he said quietly, "that you will have to explain to him why you came. Or should you prefer to explain to me?"

He saw her biting her lip.

"Suppose I did explain to you," she replied, "would you consider it your duty to pass the explanation on to Mr. Hatton?"

"That would depend upon the explanation. You see, it is a serious offense to obstruct a police officer in the execution of his duty."

"Whatever do you mean?"

"I mean that you told Hatton you had never seen the dead man before."

"Well?"

"Well, I was led to my discovery of the body by hearing you call out, 'Larry! Larry! What have you done?' Those, I think were your exact words."

Avalon leaned forward. "Oh, you heard that?"

"Distinctly."

"Does—Dick know?"

"That I overheard your words? Of course not. Why should I have told him?"

"I don't know; but he has been trying to cross-examine me all night, and I have clung like a limpet to Peter Malmsey. Oh. I don't know what to say!"

"Before you say anything, even to me—have you the slightest idea who committed the crime?"

"On my word of honor, not the slightest—unless it was a case of suicide. He said he would do it."

"His injuries are not consistent with such a theory. And now, Avalon: who was this man?"

The story which Lady Avalon Westry told to Bimhashi Baruk was so true to pattern, except in its catastrophe, that the bimbashi quite easily could have concluded it without assistance from the girl. The dead man was Lawrence Bard, junior partner in a prominent firm of cotton brokers, Grantock, Ferez & Bard, of Manchester, London, Alexandria and Cairo. . . .

"You see, he caught me very young. I was a little fool. It seemed like real romance to me. I didn't think so afterward. He used to manage to get invited wherever I went and he swore he would shoot himself if I didn't marry him—although he had a wife already. But he said that she was grossly unfaithful and that he had evidence for a divorce."

"And for how long did this friendship last?"

"Oh, perhaps a year. Then I met Dick—and somehow the affair with Larry Bard suddenly seemed vulgar, sordid. I was given a job at the Ministry of Supply. He—Lawrence Bard—got an appointment there, too, and I simply couldn't make him understand that it was finished. He positively haunted me, and people began to talk. Of course, Father heard the story; he would. You see, it was really because of Larry Bard that I wouldn't agree to marry Dick. I felt he ought to know, but I hadn't the pluck to tell him."

Avalon's voice remained low and clear, but not entirely steady. "Take your time, my dear," said the bimbashi. "It would be pleasant to sit down, but ruinous to your frock, I'm afraid."

"I am all right, Major. You are very kind. Because, really,

I deserve no sympathy. As you know, I was packed out here to my aunt Elfie and I had quite determined to make a clean breast of it and leave the result to Dick. Unfortunately, in a way, Dick is like no other man I know; he is early Victorian in some respects, and I have just been putting off the evil moment. I have been a wretched coward — because, you see, I adore Dick, and I dare not think—"

She was silent for nearly a minute.

"Imagine my feelings when Larry Bard rang me up and said he had just arrived in Cairo! He wanted to come along, but I definitely refused to see him. He was so insistent, though, that I knew I should have to see him sooner or later; and I made up my mind it should be for the last time. Since I had, well, come to my senses, I had heard a lot of things about Lawrence that I ought to have known before. He lived like a millionaire and had already squandered a considerable fortune brought to him by his wife. There were worse rumors, too."

"And so you put off Cardew and met Bard?"

"Yes. Nan Etherton had invited me but I hadn't meant to come. I thought I might safely see him here, among such a crowd, and meet no one who knew him. He had dashed up from Alexandria, where his firm has an office, and said he would have to borrow dress clothes. I called Nan, and she arranged to let us meet in the study as her husband was away; she gave me the key when I arrived."

"What time was that?"

"It must have been some time after eleven. He didn't phone me till about ten. I told him to come in by the garden gate down there—I described the way—and walk straight up to the house."

"You met him out here, then?"

"No. I waited on the terrace and let him in through a French window to the study. He told me that the divorce decree had gone through and seemed to think, as no obstacle remained, that I should fall into his arms. When I made him understand, finally, that everything between us was finished, he began to behave like a madman. I was so terrified that I ran out into the garden, and he followed me."

"Your last interview was in the garden?"

"Near the gate. It is at the end of this path. He made the most urgent appeals—said if I turned him down he was going to shoot himself. Then khamisn broke like fury. I tore myself away and bolted up to the

house. The French window was open, just as I had left it, and I slipped in. The key was in the door, which was locked. I opened it and looked out: Peter Malmsey was just passing by!"

"Did he see you?"

"No. But I jumped back and forgot to close the door. I decided to risk the dust, to go out onto the terrace and to run around to the main entrance. While I stood there, hesitating, I heard someone stumbling up toward me. He must have seen me, for he gasped—'Avalon!' I half stepped back; I was nearly suffocated. Then, I saw him."

"Where?"

"Just where he was found. He was — g h a s t l y white, blood streaming down. Then, he fell."

"And you?"

"I screamed, and cried out before I could stop myself."

"And then?"

"I thought I heard someone coming in. I ran onto the terrace and right around the house. I tried to find my car, but someone had moved it. Then Hassan came out to bring everyone back —and I knew that Larry had been found."

"This is absolutely all you know about the matter?"

"Absolutely."

"You know nothing about Miss Arlen?"

"I never saw her in my life before the inquiry tonight."

Bimbashi Baruk was satisfied.

"Keep out of Cardew's way for the present. Go and make your peace with Hatton. He will understand."

Bimbashi Baruk watched the slender figure melt into shadow; then, he set to work, his task lightened by a clear moon. Without much difficulty he found the spot at which that final interview had taken place. He read there evidence of just such a scuffle as Avalon had described, for the wall here, mantled in bougainvillea, swept up to a height of six feet and had protected the soft sand from the wind.

With his eye he measured the distance to the gate; it was a half gate embowered in flowers; and, as he stared toward it, something focused his attention. Two large terra-cotta pots, from which cascaded floral vines, marked the end of a narrow bypath leading up to the house. A native gardener (as if the way of native gardeners) had left a spade, its haft upright, driven into soft soil just at the corner of this path, and some sudden blow had jerked it violently sideways. Touched by moonlight, the tilted edge of the blade glittered evilly. Closer inspection (he avoided contact with the

implement) confirmed conjecture.

The blade was wet with blood.

A number of other indications enabled him to reconstruct the scene; and as he did so his expression grew grimly apprehensive. It is hard to believe a man one has liked and respected to be a liar; yet here, written in blood and sand, was circumstantial evidence pointing plainly to the culprit.

Cardew, on his own admission, had seen the pair going into the garden. When Avalon had run back to the house he had confronted Bard, struck him (that would explain the cut on his jaw) and Bard, falling onto the pointed corner of the blade, had sustained that deep head wound. Wounded, but still conscious, he had staggered back, and collapsed. So ran the bimbashi's facile reasoning—when, magically, his expression changed. With infinite care, using a leaf and a corner of his pocket handkerchief, he took up from the sandy path a small, blue object. It was a beautifully carved scarab of lapis lazuli. . . .

His investigation had taken longer than he had realized, and when he returned to the study, Hatton was just hanging up the phone.

"I have seen Lady Avalon," he said shortly. "However, panic excuses her behavior, I suppose. Paul Ferez, one of the dead man's partners, happens to be in Cairo with his wife, and I have just established contact. He's on his way out here. Bard was in a fiinancial jam. Ferez had a cable from England earlier tonight, and it seems that Bard has been swindling the government for over two years. You see his game? He knew he had come to the end of the rope and he got official consent to visit their Alexandria office with the idea, first of all, of getting out before the crash. Also, if he could compromise Lady Avalon, he reckoned by blackmail to get the necessary funds from her family to save himself. He was a good-looker of sorts, and he dramatized his personality. She wasn't the first to fall for him."

He paused, staring at the bimbashi.

"But none of this makes the case any better for Cardew. Now that we have had the truth from Lady Avalon I suppose I might as well release Miss Arlen. Clearly she is not concerned."

Bimbashi Baruk was staring into space, and when he spoke his voice sounded afar off:

"I should not dream of intruding Hatton, in the ordinary

way; but this case involves the honor of a brother officer. Could you possibly allow me five minutes' private conversation with Miss Arlen before you let her go?"

Adrienne Arlen was a slenderly graceful woman who might have been twenty-seven. Dark and perfectly groomed, she had gray-green eyes which lent beauty to a face otherwise no more than ordinarily pretty. She was engagingly *degage*. Over her white frock she wore a short ermine cape. She had a blue suede bag under her arm.

"My dear Miss Arlen," said the bimbashi in his pleasant voice, "this interference in a matter which really doesn't concern me must seem impertinent. But I am wondering if you can help me to clear up a small point?"

"I shall be happy to do so, Major Baruk." Her voice was low-pitched and oddly soothing.

"Thank you. In the first place, then, how long have you known Lady Avalon Westry?"

"I don't know her at all. I met her tonight for the first time. We decided at that very moment to change our dressmakers."

"Change your dresmakers?"

Miss Arlen laid her bag, face downward, on a chair and slipped the cape from her shoulders.

"Jane Watkin of Bruton Street sold me this gown as an exclusive model. She sold another, an exact replica, to Lady Avalon just before she left London."

Bimbashi Baruk smiled. His mood had changed entirely—for swift enlightenment had come.

"Might I ask you to raise the hood?"

She did so, drawing the cowl over her hair. "Perhaps you don't realize what it means to two women to meet wearing identical gowns!"

"I appreciate its importance more keenly than you suppose. Jane Watkin of Bruton Street had made a pretty mess of things. By the way, Miss Arlen, do I understand that you came here alone?"

"Yes." She nodded. "I came quite late, too. You see, one day recently I met Nan Etherton (I used to know her before her marriage) and she asked me to come to her party. I don't think I should have done so, but during the evening I had a fit of the blues; so at last I found a cab and came along, hoping that company might might cheer me up."

"What time was that—roughly?" the bimbashi asked.

"Well, it must have been near midnight. The storm broke soon after I arrived. Nan had disap-

peared, and I didn't know a soul. I was just preparing to go, when—"

"You were caught up in the meshes of the law?" Bimbashi Baruk suggested. "Yes, that was bad luck. But I am wondering"—he carefully placed something on a pad immediately under the lamp—"if this formed part of your white and blue ensemble."

Adrienne Arlen stepped forward, looked down at the lazuli scarab, and turned so pale that the bimbashi grew alarmed. He sprang forward, but she shook her head and recovered her remarkable composure.

"Where—did you find it?"

"It is yours?"

"No."

"It has evidently fallen out of a ring—and there are specks of blood on it. I am sincerely reluctant to pain you, but were you out in the garden tonight?"

"I have never left the house."

He challenged the gray-green eyes and knew that this was true. "I found it near the spot where Lawrence Bard was attacked. Whoever struck him down wore a ring from which this scarab was knocked out by the violence of the blow." Adrienne Arlen sank slowly back into the chair from which she had stood up. "You see, Miss Arlen, I am in your hands, and so I can only ask you—do you recognize this scarab?"

Adrienne Arlen avoided the searching gaze of Bimbashi Baruk; she retained her composure with obvious difficulty, and when she answered, it was in a murmur.

"No—I don't."

He shook his head reprovingly. "I am sorry that you felt it necessary to reply in that way," he said gently. "Are you *sure* you would not like to reconsider the matter?"

She extended her hands in a pathetic gesture. The last shreds of self-confidence were slipping from her. "How can I?" she whispered. "How can I?"

Less than ten minutes later Hassan announced Paul Ferez. Hatton opened the door of an adjoining room and watched Ferez closely as he gave formal evidence of identification. Then, all three returned and sat down.

"A great shock to you, Mr. Ferez?" Hatton suggested.

Ferez shok his head. Swarthy, thickset, he had a mass of wavy black hair, bright dark eyes and a sort of restless alertness.

"He was a bad lot," he replied simply. "This was sure to come. It was probably his heart. He had lived too rapidly."

"I agree," Hatton replied, "but in order to avoid misunderstandings, I think I should ask you a

question, Mr. Ferez." He pulled aside a sheet of paper and uncovered a small object which lay under it. "Is this lapis lazuli scarab your property?"

Paul Ferez rested broad sunbrowned hands on the desk and looked down at the scarab. Bimbashi Baruk looked at Paul Ferez's hands; and on the third finger of the left he saw a white circle, where a ring had habitually been worn. At which moment Ferez glanced up, and met the gaze of those accusing eyes; they were of the same blue as the scarab. He shrugged his shoulders and smiled. One might almost have described his smile as one of relief.

"It is, sir. Where did you find it?"

"I found it at the spot where you attacked Bard," the bimbashi replied. "It has some of his blood on it. Suppose you were to explain what occurred."

"I must warn you," Hatton interpolated, "that anything you say may be used in evidence."

"That's fair enough. I have been trying to make my mind up all the way along. I see that you gentlemen had already made it up for me. It's pretty simple, too. First, here and now, I want to make one thing clear. I had no intention of killing Bard. I'm not a killer. But in doing what I did I had gross provocation as I'm going to prove to you, quite frankly. I'm a Spanish-American by birth and maybe hot-tempered. You can judge for yourselves.

"I discovered some time back (this is a very painful revelation to make) that my wife had been having an affair with Lawrence Bard. Well—I got over it, but I brought her out here and I took charge of the Alexandria office. A few days back I had to come to Cairo on business, and while Jean—that's my wife—and I were at dinner tonight I had a message from our Alexandria manager, to say that Bard had arrived in Egypt. Maybe I jumped to conclusions; it's quite likely I said too much. But we quarreled, and Jean went out. Soon after that came a cable—and I knew that Bard was a common crook."

The words of Paul Ferez had a ring of honesty which Bimbashi Baruk did not fail to recognize.

"This was near midnight, but I knew where I could find my attorney—and I knew I needed him. I was just driving off from the Continental when another car passed . . . and Bard was in it!"

" 'The fate of every man have we hung around his neck'," mur-

mured the bimbashi. "So you followed?"

"Sure, I followed. I followed him right here. But he didn't come in at the front; he came in by a gate at the bottom of the garden. Now, I know this villa; I know Mrs. Etherton, and I know she and Jean used to be friends. What would any man have thought? That it was a rendezvous. Jean had come here too—come to meet Bard. Well, I lost his trail. I was scouting around the garden, wondering whether to go up to the house or not, when I saw him—and Jean was with him!"

"Where was this?" asked the bimbashi.

"Near the point where he came in. They didn't see me; I was ten paces away, But I could see them well enough, although it was getting black as pitch. I just watched and listened. I couldn't hear Jean's words, only a murmur, but I heard most of Bard's. Then he grabbed at Jean, and I closed in nearer. The storm broke. She wriggled free and ran. He turned to follow—and found himself face to face with me."

Paul Ferez stood up and began to pace the carpet.

"It was very dark by this time, but I could read his expression. He knew what was coming to him. I hit him, just once, left him lying there, and went out to my car. When I got back. I found I had broken my ring—and Jean wasn't home. She hasn't come home. Those are the facts, gentlemen, and I have nothing to add except to repeat that Bard's death was accidental. It was my fault, but not my intention."

As Ferez dropped back into an armchair, Bimbashi Baruk and Hatton exchanged glances; and the bimbashi went out.

"You have my sincere sympathy, Mr. Ferez," said Hatton. "I believe a charge of manslaughter may be reduced to one of assault and battery. I am all the more sorry for you because of the mistake you have made—"

"What mistake?"

"We have a lady here who has already made a statement regarding what occurred in the garden tonight. As we hope to keep her name out of the matter, should this be possible, excuse me if I don't introduce you. Come in B. B."

Bimbashi Baruk opened the door and ushered Avalon into the dimly lighted study. She had the cowl of her white frock drawn over her fair hair; but as she entered Paul Ferez came to his feet like one electrified.

"This lady," explained Bim-

bashi Baruk, "is she whom you saw with the late Lawrence Bard. With the hood raised, since she is probably of similar figure (and possibly wears a similar dress) even a woman's husband might be deceived — during khamsin. I don't believe Mr. Hatton will wish to detain you tonight, although the facts must naturally be made the subject of further inquiry. You will probably find your wife at home when you return, and I should advise you, Mr. Ferez, for the present, to say nothing whatever to her about your movements this evening—and to ask her no questions about her own movements" . . . .

Mystery of the Vanishing Detectives

I do not normally see Television, so there is no intention here to refer to programming trends in the industry. But I must admit to increasing confusion as to the reasoning behind a trend, in Radio, to one after another eliminate programs which gave a lot of pleasure precisely to the people whose interests Radio presumably should be most concerned with in its programming. It is after all the buying public, the consumers, the housewives, the people who are appealed to in the commercials, who listened to the real life stories which were early victims of the efficiency experts. And now, one after another, the detective stories are also vanishing.

Let us ignore for the moment the to this writer important reality that these programs provided employment, in the aggregate, for hundreds of men and women, professionals who've not necessarily been absorbed by other programs or in other departments. Let us concentrate solely on the reality that these programs, whether or not they were sponsored, were listened to and were liked by that general public which were are told Radio is fighting to hold.

Who then decides that these programs, after thirteen weeks, or twenty-six weeks, or longer, should no longer be carried? How *are* "the constantly varying preferences of the audience" determined?

JOHNNY DOLLAR, a detective series, has been the most recent victim. This writer recently queried CBS on the disappearance of the program and received back a most courteous letter from Mr. Gerald F. Maulsby, Director, Network Programs, which said in part:

"Whenever the broadcast media find it necessary to adapt to changing conditions, there is often the wish that things might be left as they are. But our function, in the very nature of things, involves change if we are to continue to satisfy the constantly varying preferences of the audience and to meet the competition of other media.

"The changes have been adopted after long and earnest consultation with our affiliated stations. While some programs have been removed from the schedule, it is our purpose to expand our services in news and informational programming in which network radio excels."

Let me, as a member of the listening public, plaintively point out that programs such as JOHNNY DOLLAR, and other detective series, did much to make people turn to their radios, instead of to other media, for the relaxation we all need. This, from a public relations point of view, is *not* sound programming!

H.S.S.

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the last man alive

by Craig Rice

He was the last man left alive in the world.

He found that out a few minutes after he woke up. Perhaps "woke up" isn't the word for it. Rather, there eventually came a time when he couldn't force his eyelids to stay closed any longer over a pair of eyes that felt like a couple of hot meatballs.

Somehow he managed to sit up. He'd been sleeping in his clothes, and they looked it. It had been that last Cutty Sark that had done him in, he decided. He wondered how he'd gotten back to the hotel.

He glanced over at his unknown roommate. When he'd checked in yesterday afternoon at the hotel where he'd always stayed in Mid City, he'd been told there was a convention in town, and he'd have to share a room. That was all right with Ned Godwin, as long as the roommate didn't talk in his sleep. It was a situation he'd run into more than once in his career as a salesman of surgical instruments.

Craig Rice once wrote that she tried, in this story, to "incorporate some of the unutterable fear which we all have—the fear of being the last man left alive in the world". Malone was of course "the only important man" in her life. But this story is not about him. It is "a story of fear, anguish and terror. . . ." H. S. S.

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The roommate was sleeping peacefully. Ned envied him.

He glanced at his watch. Nine o'clock, time to be up, shaved, fed, and on the ball. He walked to the window, pulled up the shade, to see what kind of day it was.

Something was wrong. Something was very wrong.

It was nine o'clock in the morning, and the streets should have been crowded and alive. Men on their way to work, housewives, on their way to early morning shopping, kids on their way to the playgrounds. Cars, taxis, and an occasional bus.

There was nothing. Not so much as a stray dog chasing a stray cat.

He clung to the windowsill and watched desperately for some kind of life in the gray, dismal morning. There had to be *some* movement, *some* sound.

There wasn't. Not a whisper. He was the last man left alive in the world.

He turned around and looked at his roommate, and decided to wake him.

He was very sound asleep. Finally Ned shook him. He still didn't wake.

It took a little while for Ned to realize that he was dead.

A scalpel from Ned's sample kit of surgical instruments had been shoved into his back, and there was a lot of blood everywhere.

What a kind of unreasoning reason, he pulled out the scalpel, took it into the bathroom, washed and dried it very carefully, and put it back in the sample kit. He discovered there was blood on his hands now, and he carelessly wiped them off on his shirt.

The police. He would have to call the police.

He turned on the lamp that stood on the little table between the beds. It didn't light.

Of course. If there was no one left alive in the world, there would be no electricity.

He picked up the phone and held it to his ear for a long time. There was no answer. By now, he wasn't surprised. He was the last man alive in the world. There would be no one at the desk to answer the switchboard.

Well, he would have to go to the police station in person.

He looked at himself in the mirror, ran a comb through his disheveled dark hair. The shirt, he decided, was passable, and he could do without a shave for a few hours. He took the jacket from over the back of the chair, slipped it on, and straightened his tie.

But why? he asked himself

suddenly. No one was going to see him.

Because he wanted to look fairly presentable when he walked into the police station.

But there weren't going to be any police. There wasn't anybody, anywhere, except himself.

It was then a kind of panic seized him. He ran out into the hall, paused to catch his breath. The hotel was deathly still. He walked to the elevator, started to reach for the button, and stopped himself. The elevator wasn't going to come up. There was no one to run it.

He walked down the stairs into the silent and deserted lobby. There was no sign of the night clerk who also ran the switchboard and the elevator.

Out in the street, a new thought struck him. He was the last man alive in the world, so he owned it now. As he walked down the deserted street he began looking in shop windows. There was nothing to stop him from entering any one of these stores and helping himself to the finest neckties, the best of shirts, the most perfectly tailored suits.

He could help himself to all the jewelry he wanted; rings, bracelets, wrist watches, earrings, pins.

He could go into the supermart and pick out the best steaks in the place, artichokes, caviar, anything that his heart desired.

Then he remembered. There would be no one to admire the ties, the shirts, the suits. There would be no one to whom he could give the jewelry. And there would be no way to cook the steaks, unless he found wood and built a fire. Eventually the supply of food would run out, and there would be no one to provide more.

He sank down on a bench in the little park not far from the hotel and thought it over. He wished he could have a hot cup of coffee to chase the last reminder of Cutty Sark from his head, but he knew there was no way to get it now.

Instead, he reached in the jacket pocket for a cigarette.

These weren't his brand. He stared at them for a moment. For that matter, this wasn't his jacket, either.

He felt for his wallet. It wasn't his wallet, but he wished it were. He had never carried that much money in his life. He reminded himself that no amount of money was going to make any difference to the last man alive in the world.

According to the identification in the wallet, it belonged to one Graham Devers; therefore the jacket belonged to him too. He realized what must have hap-

pened. In his haste he had picked up his roomate's jacket, leaving his own behind.

With a logic born of the last echo of the Cutty Sark, he decided that the decent thing to do was to return the jacket and the wallet, for all that the man was dead.

He retraced his way through the silent streets to the hotel, walked throught the deserted lobby and climbed the stairs to the room.

He was *not* the last man alive in the world.

The room was full of people, and most of them were cops.

There was one big guy, big and broad and hefty, with an unfriendly face the color of fresh cut steak, and little pig eyes. There was a tall, skinny guy with a crew cut and a tanned face, chewing on a cigar. There were a couple of nondescript-looking guys, one with a camera and one with a finger print kit. There was an important appearing fat man in a gray suit, and he too was chewing on a cigar. And in the corner was the night clerk, looking speechless and scared witless.

They were all his enemies, he told himself. But he welcomed the sight of them. Because they were all alive. Everyone in the room was alive, except the form on the bed.

"Well I'll be blessed," the red-faced man said "He came back!" He advanced toward Ned, and Ned instinctively backed toward the door. "Well, Mr. Devers?"

"I'm not Mr. Devers," Ned said. "Mr. Devers is dead." He knew suddenly he had to get away, and he thought he knew how to do it. One hand fingered the room key in his pocket.

"Mr. Godwin is dead. You killed him with one of the instruments from his sample kit. Why did you come back?"

"Because," Ned said, "I'm the last man left alive in the world."

The thin man snorted. "Playing crazy, huh?"

Ned edged a little closer to the door.

"Why did you kill him?" the big man demanded. "Because you wanted his money, or because you were too drunk to know what you were doing?"

"I didn't kill him," Ned said stubbornly.

"Then how did you get the blood on your hands and your shirt, Mr. Devers?"

"I'm not Mr. Devers," Ned said desperately. "I'm Ned Godwin."

The man in the gray suit who had been going through the sample kit said, "Hey, maybe the guy *is* nuts. Here's the weapon, Andy. I'll stake my reputation

as a medical examiner. And it's been washed very carefully and put back in the kit."

The resulting conference gave Ned the opportunity he had been watching for. He was cold sober now, and terribly afraid.

In one quick series of moves he slipped through the door, pulled it shut, and locked it from the outside. He could hear furious roars of protest and loud pounding on the door as he raced down the one flight of stairs. It was only a matter of minutes, he knew, before that door would be broken down, or before someone would shoot the lock out.

He ran around the corner of the hotel to the parking lot, reaching in his pocket for the car keys on the way. Time seemed to freeze and so did his fingers as he slid the key in the lock. He roared out into the street just as he heard a shot behind him. That door had opened easily.

Now where? The police car would be after him in a matter of seconds.

In a big city—it might have been different. But in a town of twenty-five thousand people, eluding pursuit was a more difficult problem. Besides, it was a problem he was totally unfamiliar with.

Besides, if he did elude pursuit, where would he go?

Madge Lewis. That was the answer.

He swung his little green Chevvy into Atkinson Avenue just as he heard sirens in the distance. Two blocks up Atkinson, one block down Jefferson. He drove an extra half block, spun around the corner and parked a good safe distance from Madge's little bungalow.

The sirens were getting close now.

He ducked off the street, ran across vacant lots and down an alley to the back door of the bungalow, where he pounded loudly on the door.

It seemed forever before it opened. There was Madge, the public stenographer, the good scout, the good date, the gorgeous girl. She had on a seersucker housecoat, her hair was uncombed, and there was cream on her face.

"Madge," he said, "don't ask anything yet. Just let me in. Quick."

She pulled him in, slammed and locked the door, looked at him and said, "Brother, what a night you must have had!" Then she too heard the sirens.

"It'll be a little time before they get to here," he said weakly. Suddenly he was ready to collapse.

Madge grabbed his arm and steered him into the bedroom.

"Take off your shoes and get in that bed."

One more minute and he'd have fallen into it. He was cold all over, and it was hard to breathe.

By the time he'd pulled the covers up to his chin she was back, a glass in her hand.

"Drink this," she said. "I'd have brought you coffee, but I think you're going to need sleep. Besides, I don't want the house to smell as though coffee had been made when the cops get here on their routine search." He coughed, wheezed, and felt the warmth begin to return to his veins.

He'd had more than one date with Madge. So, he suspected, had a large percent of the salesmen who passed through Mid City. Not that it mattered. The public stenographer in the lobby of Mid City's one hotel was bound to meet all of them and Madge, alone in the world, could hardly be expected to turn down a few dates. He himself only saw her twice a year, but he remembered her in between.

Her uncombed hair was a frankly dyed but glossy red, her pale skin was creamy and soft, baby skin. The blue and yellow seersucker housecoat didn't do a thing for her, but even it couldn't conceal the collection of curves that added up to her figure.

"Tell me—" she began.

There was an insistent ring at the doorbell. She put a finger to her lips, pulled the covers almost over his head and went out, shutting the bedroom door.

He could hear the dialogue faintly through the closed door.

"Madge, I'm sorry to bother you—" that would be the big, red-faced man— "but we're looking for a fella—"

"You'd better be sorry," Madge said. "An hour like this!"

Ned could hear the red-faced man clear his throat. "We gotta ask everyone along here, 'cause his car's parked right around the corner."

"He?" Madge asked.

Ned crossed his fingers and prayed that they wouldn't search the house.

"Escaped murderer," the red-faced man was saying. "Fella named of Graham Devers. Killed a fella name of Ned Godwin down to the Jefferson Hotel last night."

Ned felt, rather than heard, Madge gasp.

"You know either of 'em?"

Madge said, "I've met both of them. Down at my desk—they're both salesmen, and most of the salesmen save up their paper work for me to do when they

get to Mid City. But why did he do it?"

"Money, I guess," the policeman told her. "Or drink. Or just plain cussedness."

There was a little pause and then Madge said slowly, "I did see someone a few minutes ago, but I coundn't swear who it was. I'd just gotten out of bed and come to the door to see if the morning paper was here yet. It wasn't. But I saw a man running down the street."

"Notice what he had on?" There was excitement in the man's voice.

"Not especially. I think—he had on a plaid sport jacket. But I wouldn't swear to it."

Ned could hear the red-faced man breathing hard. "Notice which way he was going?"

"Toward Atkinson Avenue."

"Thanks, Madge." The door slammed shut.

She came into the bedroom. Her face was pale, and she was trembling a little. "You'd better let me burn that plaid jacket," she said. She sat down on the end of the bed. "Ned, what is this? You're not dead, you're not Graham Devers, you—" Her voice broke off.

"I'm the last man left alive in the world," he said, and laughed.

"You're crazy." She said, "you must be crazy. Or maybe I am. Because I know who you are."

"Listen to me," he said. "There's been a mix-up in names because I happened to pick up the wrong jacket. The police think I'm Graham Devers and that I murdered Ned Godwin."

She reached for a cigarette. "It'll be easy enough to prove that you're Ned Godwin."

"Sure," he said, "and then the police will simply pull a switch and decide that Ned Godwin murdered Graham Devers. See? Either way, I can't win."

"Tell me," she said, "did you?"

He shook his head. "I wasn't that drunk."

She stood up and said, "I am going to burn that jacket. And I'm going to start you a good hot bath while you get out of those clothes."

He lay in the hot water and relaxed, suddenly realizing how very tired he was. Last night must have been bigger, better and later than he remembered. It was good to be out of the hot, sticky, wrinkled clothes he'd been sleeping in, good to wash the blood off his hands, good to forget for a few precious minutes.

Madge called through the door, "There's a razor in the cabinet if you want it, and a bathrobe on the bed I think will fit you. I'm making breakfast."

By the time he reached the

kitchen he was beginning to feel a little better. Not much, but a little.

Madge poured coffee and said, "Fine thing to have happen to a girl at six o'clock in the morning."

He lifted his cup, put it down again and said, "What time did you say it was?"

She pointed to the electric kitchen clock. Its hands stood at five minutes to six.

He looked at his wristwatch. It still declared the time to be nine o'clock. He lifted it to his ear. It was silent. He began to laugh.

"What on earth are you laughing about?" Madge demanded

He went on laughing. "Forgot to wind my watch." He choked on his laughter. "Last man alive in the world." He shook his head, speechless now. He couldn't explain it to her. He went on laughing and laughing until at last he couldn't stop.

She steered him into the bedroom and onto the bed. He was still laughing when he went to sleep, and that was almost before she'd closed the door to the room.

IT MIGHT have been minutes, it might have been hours, it might have been days later when he woke. He woke slowly and unhappily, lay in bed trying to remember everything. He turned his head and saw that a little table had been drawn up beside the bed, with an ash tray, cigarettes and matches. He reached for the cigarettes gratefully and thought about Madge.

He looked around the room. It was conventionally pleasant and comfortable room; somehow it suited her. Organdy curtains and chintz drapes, a skirted dressing table with a three-way mirror, oval framed silhouettes on the wall.

He was considering getting out of bed when he heard her come in.

She had a drycleaning bundle over one arm, and a box under the other.

She dumped the box on the bed, tore the paper from the bundle. His slacks had been cleaed and pressed. She opened the box. A new shirt, and a new jacket.

"I hope I got the right size," she said. "I judged by the old ones. I burned your other shirt along with the jacket. Blood doesn't wash out too easily."

He reached out for her hand, squeezed it, kissed it. "How much do I owe you?"

"Nothing. I paid for everything out of that fat wallet. After all, if Devers murdered you, as the police seem to have decided, the least he can do is

buy you a clean shirt."

"I wish I knew six languages," he said, "because I'd like to thank you in six languages." He looked at her appreciatively. Her coffee-with-cream colored linen fitted not only her but the humid July weather perfectly, her glossy red hair was coiled in a smooth bun on the back of her neck. He thought it would be fun to muss it up, but this was not the time.

Maybe she sensed his idea, because she moved away from the bed and made a gesture of patting her hair into the smooth perfection it already had. "I'm going out again and see what I can learn," she told him. "Everybody talks to a public stenographer. And you, you make yourself at home. There's food in the ice-box, liquor in the kitchen cabinet, magazines and a set of the Encyclopedia in the living room. Don't answer the phone, don't open the door."

She brushed an imaginary wrinkle from her dress. "And don't worry."

He lay there for a few minutes after she'd gone, savoring the last of his cigarette. She was right; everybody talked to a public stenographer.

He'd told her things about himself he never would have told to another living soul; his lonely boyhood as an only child, his unsuccessful try at medical school, unsuccessful because of his father's illness and the need for clerking in the small town grocery to provide just the barest necessities, his even deeper loneliness after his parents' deaths. The years in the army, and finally, the job as a traveling salesman selling surgical supplies. The wish for a home and family, and the realization that it wouldn't be fair to tie any girl down to the life of being the wife of a traveling salesman.

He'd told all that to Madge; somehow she'd seemed to understand how it was to be completely alone. Alone in the world. In a sense it was like being the last man alive in the world.

"Stop that," he said to himself, out loud. He slid out of the bed and tried on the shirt. He was not surprised that it fitted perfectly.

It was good to be dressed in clean clothes again. He looked around for his car keys and found them, with a handful of small change and his penknife, on the corner of the dressing table. He slipped them in his pocket and stood admiring the ornate bottle of perfume that dominated the table. White Dawn. He had a vague recollection of having priced it once while Christmas shopping for a

girl in Milwaukee, and that it cost thirty dollars an ounce. This bottle looked as though it held a good eight ounces.

He pulled out the stopper, poured a drop on his finger and sniffed at it. Yes, it was the same scent.

Somehow he was glad he'd given the girl in Milwaukee a box of candy instead.

He went out into the cheerful little living room. She hadn't been kidding; there really was a set of the Encyclopedia. Luckily she also hadn't been kidding when she said there were magazines.

He picked up one, thumbed through it, and lit a cigarette.

The cigarette tasted of White Dawn. He sighed, went into the kitchen and explored the cabinet. There was a bottle of Cutty Sark, and he poured a generous three fingers.

He considered frying an egg, and decided it would taste of White Dawn. That was a perfume that lingered!

Darkness was beginning to seep in through the windows, and he realized that he must have slept through the day and the early evening.

He was pouring a second drink when he heard the front door opening. It had to be Madge, but instinctively he kicked the kitchen door shut.

It was Madge, but she was not alone. He recognized the voice of the big red-faced cop.

"Madge, I'm going to search the house," the rough voice said.

Well, they weren't going to find him. Because they wanted to hang Graham Devers for the murder of Ned Godwin, or hang Ned Godwin for the murder of Graham Devers. He was going to be a long way away.

He opened the back door silently and slipped out into the deepening dusk.

No car to duck into this time; the cops already had the little green Chevvy. And, he suddenly realized, no money except the small change in his pockets. The Graham Devers wallet, and the jacket Madge had bought for him, were back in the house. He wondered how she was going to explain them to the police. But there wasn't any way to help her now.

He was going to have to get to wherever he was going to get on foot. He walked down the alley to Jefferson and paused to consider. Where was he going to go?

How was he going to get there? What was he going to do when he did get there?

He could wire the home office for money. But by now the newspapers would be loud with

headlines. He could see the conservative home office wiring money to a fugitive from justice. Chances were he didn't even have a job any more.

Hitchhike? Probably every man, woman, child and sparrow in the vicinity had his description by now. And anyway, in what direction would he hitchhike?

Maybe he'd better go to the police and tell them the whole story. Say to the red-faced man, "If I tell you the truth, you'll never believe me."

Maybe he'd better just start walking.

He stepped off the curb just as a car pulled to a stop beside him. He jumped back. The front door was swung open.

"Get in, mister."

He stepped back a little more. It wasn't a police car, he reassured himself, but he took one more step back just to be on the safe side.

"I said, get in, mister. It's for your own good."

He got in.

The man behind the wheel was no more than a vague shadow in the darkness. A menacing shadow. But by now, he had almost stopped caring.

As the car moved away he said, almost instinctively, "There is a police car parked down the street."

"Thanks," the stranger said. He spun the car around and headed in the opposite direction. "By the way," he added, "I'm your friend. I'm just inviting you out to have a drink with me. Rather an unconventional invitation, but none the less sincere."

"And accepted," Ned said.

They drove in silence to the outskirts of town and pulled in beside a little roadhouse. Ned followed his unknown host into a gloomy little room with two brown-painted booths and a tiny bar. Again he felt that sense of strangeness that had been with him when he woke in the morning, a feeling that everything was either too real or too unreal.

He ordered Scotch. Cutty Sark. The stranger ordered rye.

"My name is Little," the stranger said. "Alex Little." He was a thin man with a face that might have been carved out of gray linoleum with a very dull razor. His eyes were gray, too. They looked like clams that wished they'd never left their shells.

"All right, Buster," he said, after the drinks arrived, "I'll make a deal with you. Where's the stuff?"

The sense of unreality began to deepen.

Little said, "You were in the room with him. He's dead, and

the stuff is gone. He's no great loss, but *it* is."

Ned frowned bewildered, unhappy. "I don't know who killed him. I only know *I* didn't. Even if the police do think I did. If you'll explain what you meant about—the stuff—maybe I'll be of more help."

"There's just one chance in ten you're telling the truth," Little said, "but I'll chance it. Devers was a salesman. He was also a handsome brute, and a devil with the dames. He'd sell you a hundred dollars worth of anything for fifty dollars. We made a handsome profit.

"None of my business," Ned said, "but where did you get this —stuff?"

The stranger grinned. "That was my end of the partnership. Some of it was—well, imported, is my way of putting it."

He finished his drink. "He had a suitcase full of stuff with him. When I went in the room last night, it was gone."

Ned felt a sudden excitement. "You were in the room last night?"

"I was. I didn't want to bother him earlier. He was chasing around with some dame. Probably took her up to his room. I don't know, and I don't care. It's none of my business. I waited around until about two o'clock and went up to the room. I had a key, and I let myself in. He was dead, and the stuff was gone."

"And I?" Ned demanded, almost breathlessly.

"You weren't there. But that doesn't mean you couldn't have killed him, taken the stuff, and gone out."

Ned scarcely heard the last part of it. A leaden weight had suddenly been lifted from his mind. All through the day there had been that one small lingering doubt. What had he done, what could he have done, in those bland and black hours before his terrible waking?

Against his will, he'd had to reason that the door had been locked, that no one but himself and his unknown roommate could have gotten in, that the murder weapon had come from his sample kit, and that he hadn't known what had happened through the hours—and he didn't know how many hours there were—that he didn't remember.

Now, he knew he hadn't killed anyone, even without knowing it. Because Graham Devers had been dead when he came in; and he *did* know that he hadn't come in and gone out again.

One, possibly two people had been able to get in that room. Alex Little, and a girl. He suddenly realized that Alex Little

was still talking.

"The hell with what happened to him," Alex Little said. "He was a no-good, especially where women were concerned. But I'm not letting you out of my sight until I get my hands on that suitcase."

Everything began to fall together in Ned's mind, like the tumblers in a lock when the right combination has been reached. He measured Little carefully with his eyes. So far there had been no sign of a gun but he had no doubt there was one. Right now, the idea was to move fast.

"And I'm not letting you out of my sight until I get a few things straightened out."

He stood up. Alex Little stood up one second later. Ned grabbed his shirt front with his left hand, slugged him with his right. The thin man sagged, then crumpled. There was a startled squeak from the bartender. Ned ignored him. He felt through the fallen man's pockets. Yes, there was a gun. He put it in his own pocket.

"Mister," the bartender said, "I run a nice place here—"

"You're going to go right on running it," Ned said. He felt again through Alex Little's pockets, fished out the car keys.

There was a low moan from Alex Little.

"Shut up," Ned said, "or I'll slug you again." He looked at the bartender, a short, fat, and at the moment, scared man, and decided he was a good guy. "I won't get you into any trouble. Just help me get this lug into the car outside, and give me some change for a quarter. I've got to make a phone call."

The nervous bartender shoved two dimes and a nickel at him. Ned shut himself in the phone booth and called police headquarters.

"I want to talk to a big red-faced guy with a rough voice," he said.

Evidently his description was good. He recognized the voice the moment he heard it over the wire.

"The man you're looking for in connection with the murder of Graham Devers has been beaten up, bad. You'll find him beside the road in the 1300 block on Riverview Drive."

"Who's this?" the rough voice demanded.

"Ned Godwin."

"But you're dead—"

"Prove it," he said, and hung up fast.

"Let's move him," he said to the bartender. "You don't want to have any trouble, and I don't want you to have any trouble. Because you remind me of my favorite aunt. Let's shove him

in the car. I'll leave him two blocks down the road, and you, you don't know from January."

Between them they lugged Alex Little out to the car and shoved him in Ned promised to send the bartender an Easter card, they shook hands and parted friends.

Two blocks down the street, he slowed down. It was the 1300 block. He picked a comfortable looking patch of grass and parked beside just long enough to haul Alex Little out of the car by the armpits. He considered slugging him again just for luck, and decided against it.

He drove fast to Madge's house. She answered the door on the third ring.

She had on cream-colored slacks, and a pale green sweater. When she saw who was at the door, she added in a worried look.

"You shouldn't have come here," she gasped. "The police—"

"Put your coat on," he said, "and come with me. "I need a witness, and you're it. We're going down to police headquarters."

Her lovely eyes widened.

"Darling! You're not going to walk right into their hands!"

"I'm going to do exactly that," he told her grimly.

He felt a little light-headed now, but a hunch was working on him. He strode into the bedroom, picked up the bottle of White Dawn, and stuffed it in his pocket. He was going to smell like a refugee from a beauty parlor for days, but this was no time to worry about that. She slipped a jacket over her shoulders. "I hope you know what you're doing."

"So do I," he told her.

The red-faced man was on the desk when they came in. He gave them a startled look, then a smile.

"So," he said to Madge. "You got him."

Ned looked at her, then at the red-faced man. "So it *was* her who told you where to look for me."

"Naturally," the red-faced man said, still smiling.

That made him feel a little less like Judas.

"You've got a guy named Alex Little," he said. "He may have been mussed up a bit, and he may be in your hospital ward. If you bring him in, he may clear up a lot of things."

Madge said, "*No*—" in a startled voice.

Ned said politely, "Shut up."

The red-faced man said, not as politely, "*You* shut up." He went to work on the phone.

It was a matter of moments before two uniformed cops

shoved Alex Little into the room. He didn't look too healthy or too happy, Ned observed with a warm feeling of satisfaction.

He reached in his pocket, pulled out the bottle of White Dawn, and put it down on the red-faced man's desk. "There's your motive," he said. He turned to Madge. "Where's the rest of it?"

She said nothing for a moment, her face pale. Then she licked her lips nervously. At last she said, "He gave it to me."

"What the hell is this business with perfume?" the red-faced man growled.

"Ask him," Ned said. He turned to the gray-faced Alex Little. "Maybe you'd better tell him. I guessed the stuff was perfume. Talk, pal, and tell it fast. You don't need to worry. You're in the clear."

Alex Little began to tell it, haltingly at first.

"He sold perfume," Little said. "The finest, most expensive perfumes in the world. At about a tenth of their regular cost. How did he get them? Some of them were smuggled. Don't ask me how. Some of them were concocted in a laboratory here and put in the right-looking bottles. Don't ask me where the laboratory is, or who did it, because I don't know."

"You mean," the red-faced man said, "you won't talk?"

"I have nothing to talk about," Alex said.

Ned stood up, stuck his shaking hands in his pockets, and said, "I'll talk, and I've got something to say. Who is the girl that Graham Devers—a traveling salesman, dealing in smuggled or counterfeit perfumes—would date in Mid City? The public stenographer from the hotel. According to his partner, he was a devil with the girls—and treated them like the devil."

He paused, looked around. "Devers was dead before I came in. I know that now, and Mr. Little can prove it. I didn't have any reason to kill him, anyway. His partner here didn't have any reason to kill him. All *he* wanted was the perfume. That sort of narrows it down."

The red-faced man looked thoughtful. "Madge, I'm sorry. I guess we'll have to search your house."

She flew at Ned, a scarlet-haired fury. "You *rat*. You *skunk*. You *louse*. *You*—" Then suddenly all the fight went out of her. She said dully to the man behind the desk, "Yes, I guess you will."

"You'll save us a little time," the police officer said, "if you'll tell us where it is."

He spoke with surprising gentleness.

"It's behind the couch in the sun room," she said in that same dull voice. Someone eased her into a chair. "I was jealous. I admit I was jealous. He'd said I was the only woman in his life. But on this last trip—he was different. When we went up to that room, he taunted me. He told me he'd never be tied down to one woman. I lost my head."

The words were coming from her in great, gasping sobs.

"There was the sample kit of surgical instruments open on the dresser."

She paused. It was a long, silent pause. No one moved or spoke. At last she drew a long, sighing breath.

"The perfume was an afterthought. It was there, and I knew it was valuable. I took it with me. But I couldn't resist taking out one bottle for myself. That was a mistake. A mistake any woman who loved perfume might make."

She paused once more and said, "I'm not sorry."

Ned turned away.

Back at the Jefferson House, he stopped at the desk. The night clerk rose from behind the switchboard. "We took the liberty of moving you into a different room. We thought you'd prefer it—under the circumstances."

"Very thoughtful of you," Ned said. He scowled at the clerk. "Were you asleep this morning when all this excitement happened?"

The young man looked sheepish. "As a matter of fact, I was. There's almost never a call at that hour in the morning, and there's a couch back in the office—" he motioned with one hand. "Usually I hear the buzzer, but this morning I must have been too sound asleep."

"One more thing," Ned said, very casually. "Do you happen to know if the bed-lamp up in the—the murder room—was out of order?"

"As a matter of fact, it was," the young man said. "I checked the room myself. Bulb burned out."

Up in his room Ned looked over the city, sleeping now. A stopped watch, a burned out light bulb, and a sleeping desk clerk had produced terror.

"This morning I was the last man left alive in the world," he said to himself. He smiled, yawned, looked out at the sleeping city.

"Now," he said, "I guess I'm the last man awake in it."

reprieve

by Lawrence G. Blochman

THE GIRL obviously had been crying. She had done a pretty good job of cosmetic concealment, and as she sat in the outer office of Abraxas Detective Agency, she stole a quick verifying glance into the tiny mirror of her compact and added an extra dab of sun-tan makeup. She could do nothing, however, to hide the slight puffiness of her eyelids, or the deep look of anxiety in her blue eyes. Her hair was very dark, which made her eyes look even bluer, and the fingers which nervously jabbed out one half-smoked cigarette after the other were thin and graceful. She was small, trim, and quite young—probably not more than twenty. She started violently when the receptionist said:

"Mr. Poplar will see you now."

The girl got up, smoothed the pleats in her spring dress of pastel-blue silk, passed through two doors, and shook hands with Mr. Roderick Poplar, sole proprietor and chief operative of the Abraxas Detective Agency,

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who came around a glass-topped desk to greet her.

"Won't you sit down, Miss—?"

"Catherine Barstow," the girl said.

"Of course. Miss Barstow, what can I do for you?"

Catherine Barstow sat down. She was reassured by the firm touch of Poplar's handclasp and by his friendly smile. Still she hesitated. He did not look at all the way she had thought a detective would look. He had the shoulders of a wrestler and the sensitive hands of a surgeon. His clothes were cut in extreme Broadway fashion, yet suspended from the watch-chain across his fawn-colored double-breasted waistcoat was a Phi Beta Kappa key. His small dark mustache suggested the fop, but his high, broad forehead and the calm, penetrating gaze of his intelligent brown eyes emphatically denied any mental superficiality. He remained standing as he waited for her to speak.

"I . . . you may not want to talk to me," she said at last. "I haven't much money. How much would you charge to find my father for me?"

Poplar sat behind his desk, with his hands in his lap. He smiled tolerantly. "Why don't you go to the Bureau of Missing Persons," he said. "They're very efficient, and they won't charge—"

"Oh, I couldn't go to the police," the girl interrupted. "That's why I came to you."

"Why can't you go to the police?"

"Because of my mother, for one thing. And then father isn't missing that way. That is, he was missing, but he's not now. Only I don't know his address exactly."

Poplar's eyes narrowed. "Who sent you to me?" he asked.

"Nobody sent me. I looked for detective agencies in the classified telephone directory, and Abraxas comes first alphabetically."

"I see. Now, Miss Barstow, you say your father—." He stopped abruptly. His hands left to the edge of his desk. He leaned forward, his arms wide apart. "Your father is not John Barstow, by any chance?"

"Yes, His name is John."

"The playwright?"

"Yes."

Poplar leaned back again. "I should say that John Barstow was definitely missing," he said. "Didn't he disappear suddenly about four years ago?"

"Five years."

"Ran away with an actress, his leading lady?" Dropped from sight at the height of his career?"

"That's what the newspapers said."

"Wasn't it true?"

"Yes, I guess it was. I was only fifteen then, and everybody kept the papers away from mother and me. Mother went all to pieces, you know. She still goes all to pieces whenever anybody mentions it. So I've never talked to her about it."

"I thought your mother remarried," the detective said.

"She did."

"And she still goes to pieces when your father is mentioned?"

"Well, it's partly Eric's fault. Eric Thane is my step-father, and he can't mention father without calling him all sorts of names. When he's had a few cocktails he threatens to kill father if he ever dared show up again."

"And he has shown up?"

"Yes. He was at my graduation exercises last week. I sensed he was there, even before I saw him, 'way at the back of the auditorium. When I looked for him afterwards, he was gone."

"But you're sure it was your father, Miss Barstow?"

"Oh yes," the girl replied. "Three nights later he was waiting for me outside the house, and—"

"Pardon me. What house is this?"

"Our house in Westchester."

"Is that your father's house in Larchmont?"

"Father built it, yes. But it's always been in mother's name. When she married Eric Thane, he moved in with us."

"I see." Roderick Poplar clasped his hands behind his head. "Why was your father waiting for you, Miss Barstow?"

"To talk to me. He said that now I'd grown up and finished school, he thought there was no need for him to stay away any longer, although he wouldn't come back until he was sure his appearance wouldn't spoil my life. He asked me if I had any plans for marriage. I said—"

Catherine stopped. Her lips moved, but the words were silent. There was anguish in the gaze she turned away from Poplar.

"And you told him you were engaged?" the detective suggested sympathetically.

The girl nodded. "I told him Bill hadn't been out of college very long and was still a law clerk, but that we were going to get married as soon as he can afford it. He's with Freeman & Forbes, and they've promised to take him into the firm in a year or two."

"Pardon me again. Bill's name is—?"

"Simmons. William David Simmons. Father wanted to know if

we were very much in love and I told him yes. Then he said we were to get married right away and go to the West Coast. He said he would give us money enough to buy a little house in California and to take care of us until Bill could pass the California bar exams and get himself established."

"Did he mention how much money he was going to give you?" Poplar asked.

"He said it would be between thirty and forty thousand dollars."

"Well" The detective unclasped his hands. "Your father must be prosperous."

"Oh, he's not. At least he doesn't look it. He wore an old shiny blue-serge suit, his cuffs were frayed, and his shoes had been half-soled. He said he was going to borrow the money on his insurance policies."

Roderick Poplar got up and went to the window. In the river thirty stories below, a tug was puffing and straining to tow a string of gravel barges against the current.

Catherine waited for him to speak. Her eyes noted the titles in the bookcase back of his desk: Pollard on firearms, Lucas on forensic chemistry, Landsteiner and Levine on blood groupings, Kahn on psychopathic personalities, Schneickert on fingerprints, disguised handwriting, and burglary; Spread on the detective's desk was a copy of *Racing Form,* marked in pencil.

"What else did your father say, Miss Barstow?" Poplar asked without turning around.

"He said he hoped I hadn't believed that he was quite as black as he'd been painted. He wondered if I remembered what pals we used to be, and how devoted he always was to me. Of course I remembered how he used to spoil me. I suppose it was because I was an only child. But I told him I knew there must be some good reason for what he'd done."

Poplar turned away from the window. "Did you know the actress he ran away with?" he demanded.

"Sabina Wells? Oh yes. She used to come to our house quite frequently while they were rehearsing *Reprieve*—father's last play. I rather liked her. It was easy to see that she and father were very fond of each other. It's an awful thing to say, I suppose, but I've always suspected that mother was never very much in love with father, and I guess he needed affection. . ."

The detective came over and leaned against the edge of the desk. "You say your mother wasn't in love with your father —and yet she goes to pieces

whenever your father's name is mentioned."

"Well, mother was always very jealous," the girl explained, "and I guess her vanity was badly mauled when father deserted her. She's terribly proud and self-centered, and it must have hurt her to have to face her friends at her clubs and on the golf course."

Poplar nodded. "You've told me everything," he said, "except the principal thing: Why do you want to find your father?"

The girl did not answer.

"You've been crying," the detective said. "Did you quarrel with Bill?"

"Yes."

"Because of your father?"

"Yes. Bill doesn't want to take the money father offered. He says he'll make his own way, and that we'll get married when he has his own means. He despises father for what he did, and says he could never accept any help from a man who treated us the way father did. He even says that if I go on seeing father, our marriage is off. He—." Catherine dabbed at her small nose with a wisp of a handkerchief.

"I see." Poplar nodded. "And you want me to locate your father and arrange some sort of truce with Bill, perhaps."

"Oh, if you could. Of course you wouldn't say anything to Bill—or anyone." She hesitated. "You haven't said what your fee would be."

"Don't worry about that." Poplar held out his hand. "Call me this afternoon. "I may have news for you."

When Catherine Barstow left, Poplar thumbed the buzzer. A stocky-square-jawed man wearing yellow shoes came in. He did not take off his derby which was pushed to the back of his head.

"I got the third race right from the horse's mouth," he began.

"We're not going to the races today, Frank," Poplar said. "We've got puzzles to work. I want you to get after every insurance company in town and locate one or more policies on which John Barstow, the playwright, has been trying to borrow thirty or forty thousand dollars within the last few days. If it's no soap, get on a phone and call every company in Hartford. Then come and tell me."

Poplar settled down to his desk, pulled out a file drawer, began telephoning play brokers until he located the man who handled the works of John Barstow. The play broker gave him little information. He had not heard from Barstow in five years —not since his last written or-

der asking him to turn over all royalties to Mrs. Barstow until further notice. The first two years there had been considerable royalties, as *Reprieve* had run for a year on Broadway, and there had been several picture sales. The last few years, however, had been pretty slim—chiefly a few hundred dollars from amateur performances. No, he had no idea where Barstow was.

Frank Hughes, the man with the derby, came in carrying a sheaf of notes. "I hit the jackpot right off," he said. Barstow has a $90,000 policy with Gibraltar, ten-pay life, all paid up with accumulated dividends. He applied for a limit loan, $38,000, which was approved today."

"Who's the beneficiary?" Poplar asked.

"A Mrs. Laura Barstow Thane."

"That's his ex-wife. And where is the loan check to be sent?"

"To Miss Catherine Barstow at Larchmont."

Poplar looked disappointed.

"But wait a minute," Hughes said. "This is a hot one. Some man called Gibraltar yesterday and asked if there was any way of opposing a loan on the Barstow policy; said he understood that no loan could be made without the consent of the beneficiary. Of course he was wrong. Nobody can stop Barstow borrowing on his own policy."

Poplar nodded. "I wonder," he began. Then the phone rang. "Yes. Who? Just a moment." Poplar put his hand over the transmitter and nodded toward the rear door. "Stick around," he told Hughes. "I'll want you in a moment." Into the phone he said: "Show her in."

The detective rose to greet a well-dressed, statuesque, suspiciously blonde woman. She was at least forty-five, he estimated, yet she was still handsome in a cold, classical way.

"How do you do, Mrs. Thane?" he said. "What can I—"

"You know why I'm here," said Mrs. Thane. "Where's my daughter?"

"Daughter?" Poplar frowned. He stepped to his desk and ran through some cards in a drawer. "I'm afraid I have no client named Thane," he said. "Or perhaps you've come to retain me to find your daughter, Mrs. Thane?"

"See here." Laura Thane sat down impatiently. "I know Catherine Barstow came here, because I followed her. I got tired of waiting for her to come out, that's all. Either you're hiding her, or you've sent her out another way."

Roderick Poplar looked interested but said nothing.

"I know what she came for,"

Laura Thane continued. "It's about her father. You may just as well shed your professional ignorance, because I know John Barstow is back in town. The way the poor girl has been acting these last few days I should have suspected it before today, but I didn't. I didn't tumble until I got this in the morning mail. Here. Read it."

She took an envelope from her bag and flung it across Poplar's desk.

On a cheap piece of note paper, Poplar read:

Dear Laura.—Come and see me as soon as you get this. We've reached the Act III curtain and you'll want to discuss stage directions with me. Yours,

JOHN.

"Are you sure this is from John Barstow?" Poplar asked.

"I ought to know his handwriting. I was married to him for sixteen years.

"What do you suppose he means by 'stage directions'?"

Laura Thane sniffed. "What else could he mean, but money?" she said. "Look at the address on the note. John Barstow wouldn't be living in such a filthy neighborhood unless he was flat broke. I suppose he wants an accounting on the royalties from his last play. Well, there's no accounting to give. The money's spent. How did he expect Catherine and me to live?"

"I know," Poplar said sympathetically. He pushed the buzzer and Frank Hughes came in. "Mrs. Thane, this is Mr. Hughes, my assistant. I think we'd all better go over and call on Mr. Barstow."

"Not I," Mrs. Thane protested. "I have nothing to say to John Barstow. And no accounting to give. All I want is for him to stay away from Catherine. He has no right to interfere with her life, after the way he deserted us. If you want the job of keeping him away from her, I'd be glad to retain you, Mr. Poplar."

"I think you'd better come along," Poplar insisted quietly. "I promise I'll spare you the interview unless it's absolutely necessary."

Reluctantly, Laura Thane agreed.

The address John Barstow had given was a grimy tenement in a grimy street. The halls reeked of cooking and untidy people. The landlady put down her mop, shoved her tousled hair out of her perspiring face, and said:

"Barstow? Third floor rear. No, he ain't out. I ain't seen him come down and I been in the

stairs since early morning."

Mrs. Thane climbed the steps with them. She gathered her skirts close about her silken limbs to keep them from contamination of the walls, filthy with the accumulated smudges of ten thousand dirty hands, and the wanton scribblings of children.

"I may as well have it out with him once and for all," she said.

There was no response to their knock on Barstow's door. Poplar tried the knob. The door was locked.

He stooped, peered through the keyhole.

"Key's inside," he said. "Turn your backs."

He took from his pocket a pair of thin, long-nosed pliers with hollow jaws. He carefully inserted them into the keyhole, turned the key. Still the door would not open.

"The spring lock's shut," he said. "Get the landlady."

When the landlady's key turned, then caught with a clanking sound, the door gave only half an inch.

"He's put the chain across," the landlady said. "He must be inside."

"Better get a policeman," Poplar ordered grimly.

As the landlady clattered down the stairs, Frank Hughes tried his toes against the panel of the door. After a few tentative kicks, he looked inquiringly at Poplar. Poplar nodded. One of Frank's yellow shoes crashed through the flimsy panel.

Poplar reached through the splintered wood, unfastened the chain. The door swung open.

John Barstow was lying in bed, at the far side of the room his head was turned toward the wall, and one arm stretched beyond the edge of the bed with awkward, eloquent immobility.

Poplar and Hughes crossed the room with hurried strides. Laura Thane took three horrified steps beyond the threshold, then retreated drunkenly against the wall, her modishly-gloved hands spread behind her for support.

John Barstow's eyes were closed. His mouth was open, as though to greet Eternity with a great shout of jubilation. Poplar touched the outstretched hand. It was cold.

Laura Thane, pale and shaken, found courage to venture half way across the room. She faltered: "Is—is he—?"

"He is," said Poplar. "Very."

Frank Hughes was staring down at Barstow's face. The cheeks were bright pink. A fly buzzed irreverently about the forehead. "I never saw such a healthy-looking corpse," Hughes

said. "Look at those pink—." He stopped, glanced inquiringly at Poplar. "Monoxide?"

Poplar nodded.

"But I don't smell gas."

"He's been dead quite a while," Poplar said.

"But he couldn't have been gassed in here," Hughes said." "There's flies in here. The gas didn't kill the flies."

Poplar did not reply. He was examining a glass tube containing white tablets which lay on the floor beside the bed, next to a tumbler half full of water. He glanced at Laura Thane. She was sitting limply in a chair, watching with dull, dazed eyes. She fumbled in her bag for a handkerchief.

"I—told you—I shouldn't have —come," she mumbled.

Poplar indicated the glass tube.

"Was Mr. Barstow addicated to sleeping tablets?" he asked.

"He always suffered from insomnia," Laura Thane replied. "Do you think he might have—"

"Not with these tablets. They're non-poisonous. The autopsy will show, of course."

Poplar went directly to the single window. On the sill were two ten-cent-store cactuses and a young tomato plant growing in a coffee tin. The tomato plant was badly wilted. Poplar touched the soil in the tin. It was damp. He pursued his lips as he fingered the drooping leaves. He examined the window without touching it.

"Window's locked from the inside," he announced to no one in particular.

"John Barstow always slept with the windows closed," Laura Thane volunteered. "He couldn't stand fresh air. It was a phobia."

Poplar seemed not to hear her. He walked slowly around the room, stopped to look at the two-burner gas plate on a greasy shelf near the door. Both gas cocks were closed. He frowned.

"Look, Frank," he said. "Stand in the stairway, will you, and cough when the landlady comes back with the police? We're not supposed to touch anything until the medical examiner arrives, but—"

He recrossed the room, and pulled a pasteboard suitcase from under the dead man's bed.

The opened the suitcase. It was half empty: A frayed shirt, some much-darned socks, tattered underwear. There was an untidy stack of manuscript, and Poplar glanced over the pages. They were fragments of plays—false starts, the still-born efforts of a creative mind gone sterile. Beneath the paper he found a yellowed magazine, a five-year-old copy of *Suburban Homes*.

Poplar thumbed through it to find what made Barstow keep it. He had not far to look before he came upon an illustrated article describing the Barstow mansion in Larchmont. There were pictures of the house from all elevations, details of the rooms, vistas in the garden, plans of the house and grounds. On one of the plans someone had penciled a cross near the garage.

A cough from the hallway made Poplar close the valise quickly. He pushed it back under the bed.

He handed the patrolman his card. "Phone the medical examiner," he said. "When you come back, I'll give you all the information I have."

"Do you think they'll need me?" Laura Thane asked. She was making a valiant effort to recapture her proud, cold composure, but was not succeeding very well. She had a hard time keeping her eyes from the dead man on the bed. "I . . . have an appointment with my doctor."

"I don't think you'll be needed, Mrs. Thane," Poplar said. "They'll have to take him to Bellevue for an autopsy, and if you're interested in funeral arrangements, the undertaker can claim the body in your name. As for your problem—you won't need my services any longer to keep him away from your daughter. Should you want me for anything else, however, here is my card."

When Mrs. Thane left, Poplar immediately tackled the landlady. "Did you ever see that woman before?" he demanded.

The landlady shook her head. "Never."

"Did Mr. Barstow have any visitors yesterday that you recall?"

"No," was the reply. "Except for that man."

"What man?" The words leaped eagerly from Poplar's lips.

"The man that came around asking for poor Mr. Barstow about supper time last night," said the landlady. "I didn't ask his name."

"Did he go upstairs?"

"Sure. I don't know how long he stayed. I didn't see him come down."

"What sort of man was he?"

"Oh, he was very nice and polite. Good clothes, too."

"How old a man was he?"

"How old? About like you. Only he was better looking. Maybe he was a little younger."

"Would you recognize him again, Mrs.—"

"Mrs. Gropple. Oh, yes, I'd know him, I think."

"Thank you, Mrs. Gropple."

The detective stood for a moment lost in thought, finger-

ing his Phi Beta Kappa key. He started when Frank Hughes broke into his reverie.

"What do you think, chief?" Belden asked. "Suicide?"

"Of course not. If Barstow killed himself, he couldn't have turned off the gas cocks."

"Maybe it wasn't gas, chief."

"It was all right. Look at his pink cheeks."

"He must have been asphyxiated some place else, then," Hughes said. "And the body brought here afterwards."

Poplar shook his head. "Barstow died right in this room," he declared. "And from gas."

Hughes looked puzzled. "How do you figure that one, chief?"

"The tomato plant on the window sill," Poplar explained. "It's wilted. Tomato plants are very sensitive to carbon monoxide. One part of illuminating gas to a hundred thousand parts of air will start the leaves drooping."

"But the flies, chief—the flies are lively enough."

"Only red-blooded animals are affected by monoxide," Poplar said. "Flies don't qualify."

"I don't get it," Hughes protested. "I see how somebody might have sneaked in here to turn on the gas while Barstow was asleep last night, but I don't see how they could have sneaked back to turn it off—and then leave the door and window locked and the chain across the door from the inside. What's more, they must have sneaked back last night, because the gas smell was all gone by this morning. I don't—"

"Look, Frank," Poplar interrupted. I've got work for you, so hop to it. First I want you to find out everything you can about Eric Thane—that's the ex-Mrs. Barstow's present husband. I'm particularly interested in his business connections, if any, and his financial status. Then whip out to White Plains and find out from the Westchester County Recorder if there's a mortgage on Mrs. Barstow's—I mean Mrs. Thane's—house in Larchmont. Next, drive over to Larchmont and meet me at the Thane house. If I'm not there, wait. And if Thane's there, don't let him get away. I want to talk to him."

It was early afternoon when Roderick Poplar arrived at Larchmont. Hughes was sitting in the shade of an elm, just outside the iron-grille gates of the former Barstow estate. He told Poplar what he had learned, and the two men walked up the broad driveway to the house.

They found Eric Thane in the garden back of the house, lolling in a wicker chair under a bright parasol, a tall, frosty drink by his side, a litter of Wall

Street papers around him. He was handsome in a weak, irresponsible way, with a healthy tan which at this season of the year bespoke plenty of daylight leisure. He was at least five years younger than Laura Thane.

"We've come to tell you," said Poplar, after the preliminaries, "something which you no doubt already know. John Barstow is dead."

"As far as I'm concerned, Barstow's been dead for five years," Thane replied with a cheery smile. "You'll pardon me if I don't break down and weep, won't you?"

"Then you did know he was back in town?"

Thane's smile disappeared. "Why do you ask that?"

"I thought perhaps Mrs. Thane told you about the note she received from her ex-husband this morning."

"Laura left the house before I was up today. I didn't see her."

"But you did know Barstow was back?"

Thane hesitated. He did not look at Poplar as he said: "As a matter of fact, I suspected he was back. I saw Catherine—that's my step-daughter—talking to a man outside the gate the other night. I wasn't sure, but it looked like Barstow."

"Didn't you follow him, to make sure?"

"I did not."

"You didn't follow him, to find out where he was living?"

"Of course not." Thane leaned forward. "See here, what makes you think I have the slightest interest in John Barstow?"

"The fact that you've been living off him," said Poplar quietly.

"That I've been—?" Thane flushed. "Now see here—."

"The first year of your marriage, you were supported by the royalties from Barstow's plays. Since then you've been eating the proceeds of the mortgages on the Barstow's house. There's a first and second mortgage, Mr. Thane, and neither is more than two years old."

"You're very insulting, Poplar. I have a business of my own."

"You don't look very busy, Mr. Thane."

"That's because I never go into town during a falling market. I keep in touch with my office by phone."

"Your broker's office, you mean," Poplar said. "As a matter of fact, you don't have an account just now. You were sold out last month—for the fourth time in two years. You're not very lucky in Wall Street, Mr. Thane, and I think you might be considerably pleased if Mrs. Thane should suddenly come in-

to—say, $90,000—from Mr. Barstow's insurance," he said.

"Did you call the Gibraltar Insurance Co. yesterday to inquire if there was any way of stopping a loan that Barstow had applied for—which would deprive Mrs. Thane of some $40,000 if he died before the loan was repaid?"

"I did not!" Thane declared through clinched teeth.

"I'll not beat about the bush any longer," Poplar said. "John Barstow has been murdered."

"Murdered?"

"And while I have no authority in the matter, I do have the interests of a client to protect, and I'm anxious to get at the truth of the matter. I should think you would, too—if you're innocent."

"Yes, of course."

"Then I suggest that you cooperate with me—before you are asked to co-operate with the police. Would you drive into town with my assistant, Mr. Hughes?"

"Now?"

"Right away. I'll join you at my office shortly. I have a few things to do in the interim."

One of the things that Roderick Poplar had to do was to walk around the garden back of the Thane home. He sauntered past the tennis court toward the garage, stood for a long moment looking at a dahlia bed. The dahlias were fine-looking healthy plants that promised a colorful display later in the season. There was a border of iris around the dahlias, but they had finished blooming and had been cut back.

He got into his car and drove to the nearest barracks of the State Police. After talking with the officer in charge, he borrowed the telephone, called his office to leave instructions for Hughes to round up Catherine Barstow, Laura Thane, and Bill Simmons. Then he called the District Attorney's office in town, and had a brief conversation with a deputy who was a friend of his. Finally he got into his car and drove back to town on the parkway.

Poplar did not go directly to his office. He stopped first at the dingy tenement in which John Barstow had died.

"There's still two detectives upstairs, Mr. Poplar," the landlady said. "I guess it's all right if you go up."

Poplar didn't want to go up. He asked to see the gas meters.

"They're right back here, under the stairs," the landlady said. "The gas company has been promising to put in new ones for the last five years, but I guess they haven't got around to it. It's an awful nuisance for the

upstairs tenants to come down to put in their money."

"Money?" Poplar almost ran in his hurry to look at the bank of gas meters under the stairs. Why hadn't he thought of that before? Yes, there they were—quarter meters, survivors of another era, some of the last coin-in-slot meters still in use. Well, that cleared up the mystery of how death had entered the locked room. He said: "Mrs. Gropple, I'd like you to come to my office with me. There's a man there I'd like you to identify."

There were seven persons in Roderick Poplar's office when he arrived with Mrs. Gropple. There was Frank Hughes with Eric Thane, there was Laura Thane and her daughter Catherine Barstow, and a red-haired, blue-eyed, defiant young man who was holding Catherine's hand and who Poplar decided was Bill Simmons. There also was Deputy District Attorney Green and Lieutenant Adams of the Homicide Squad. Catherine had been crying again.

"I know this is a little irregular, asking you to come here," Poplar said, as he took off his hat, "but the District Attorney's office has agreed to it, in view of the fact that I had practically completed the investigation of the murder of John Barstow."

"See here, Poplar," interrupted Eric Thane, "if there's going to be any accusation of murder, I want to be represented by my attorney."

Poplar smiled. "I believe Mr. Simmons here is a member of the bar," he said. "Perhaps he'd be happy to represent you."

Bill Simmons merely glowered.

"First of all," Poplar continued, "I should like to ask Mrs. Gropple if the man who called on John Barstow last night is here in this room."

"He's here all right," said the landlady.

"Would you point him out, please," Poplar was watching Eric Thane closely.

"Sure," said the landlady. "That's him."

She pointed to Bill Simmons.

"Well, Mr. Simmons," said Poplar, not at all surprised. "You didn't mention this visit when I telephoned you this afternoon."

"I didn't see any necessity," declared the young man.

"But you see it now, certainly. Would you like to explain how you found Mr. Barstow's address?"

"He gave it to me, himself," said Simmons. "He phoned me and asked me to come and see him. Said he wanted to meet his future son-in-law. I went, because I wanted to tell him what

I thought of him. . . ."

"Please, Bill;" Catherine pleaded tearfully.

". . . . that I wanted him to keep his dirty paws off of Catherine's life, and that we wouldn't accept any money from him in any circumstances."

The telephone rang. "Just a moment," said Poplar. "Yes. Poplar speaking . . . You did? . . . Well, well. . . . I see. Thanks, Captain. I'll call you back."

Poplar again turned to Bill Simmons. "Did you by any chance," he asked, "drop a quarter in the gas meter marked 'Third Floor Rear' after you left Mr. Barstow last night?"

"I did not."

Poplar nodded. "I didn't think you did," he said, "although someone else did later in the evening. It was you, Mrs. Thane."

Laura Thane blanched. "I did no such thing."

Poplar smiled sadly. "Mrs. Thane," he said, "that was Captain Hawthorne of the State Police on the phone. He's been digging in your dahlia bed."

Laura Thane closed her eyes—then opened them very wide.

"You shouldn't be greatly surprised," Popular continued, "to learn that the captain found a skeleton buried among your dahlias—the skeleton of a woman. I'm not sure that we can prove, after all these years, that the bones belonged to Sabina Wells. And I doubt very much that we shall ever prove that you killed her, Mrs. Thane, to prevent her runing off with your husband because I suspect that the only witness to that crime died sometime last night. But it won't matter, Mrs. Thane, because we *can* prove that you killed John Barstow."

"You can't! I didn't even know where he lived, until this morning."

"Yes, you did Mrs. Thane. Barstow had a $90,000 insurance policy, to protect his daughter to whom he was most devoted. He must have left the policy with you, so that you could collect in case of his death. And only a few days ago he presented that policy to the Gibraltar Insurance Co. when applying for a loan. Therefore you must have returned it to him. You couldn't very well refuse, if he happened to mention something about a skeleton back of the garage. I suspect, Mrs. Thane, that the note you showed me this morning was written several days ago. It was not dated, and in ripping open the envelope, you managed to obliterate the date of the postmark."

"It's not true! It's not—"

"I suggest, Mrs. Thane," Poplar continued, "that five years

ago John Barstow told you he was going to run off with Sabina Wells, perhaps taking his daughter with him. I suggest that you killed Sabina Wells to prevent it. Barstow was a witness, of course. He may even have helped you dispose of the body. In any case, he knew where it was buried, because the location is indicated by a cross on the plan of your grounds, in a copy of *Suburban Homes* which he had in his suitcase.

"He did not go to the police, because to have you arrested would only deprive a fifteen-year-old girl of a mother at a time when a girl most needs a mother—and Barstow was passionately devoted to Catherine. Therefore he disappeared and became a party to a legend that he and Sabina Wells had eloped. But he did not give you a pardon, Mrs. Thane — only a reprieve. When Catherine had grown up, finished her education, and was prepared to start life for herself, he would come back and face you with the consequences of your crime. He did come back—to discuss stage directions for the Act III curtain. But you had a surprise ending. You killed him.

"You were in Barstow's room last night. You were probably there before that, but of last night I am positive. Before you left you opened the gas cocks on the two-burner stove. There was no gas in the pipes, because the stove connected to a quarter meter. And you left no prints on the cocks because you wear gloves, Mrs. Thane. When you left, Barstow locked the door and put the chain across.

"You knew that Barstow used sedatives and would therefore sleep soundly. You may even have remained in the stairs until you were sure he was asleep. Then you dropped a coin in the meter and left, knowing that when Barstow was dead, the gas would shut itself off. It could have been nobody else but you, Mrs. Thane, because the gas cocks were closed when I saw them this morning. They must have been closed *after* we broke into the room. And there was no one in the room but Hughes, myself—and you. For the first few seconds. Mrs. Thane, you remained near the door—within easy reach of the gas cocks. You—"

He stopped. Laura Thane had slipped from her chair, and lay huddled on the floor in a dead faint.

As Eric Thane and Lieutenant Adams lifted her to a divan Frank Hughes went for water, the deputy district attorney said to Poplar:

"Nice work, Rod. Is there any-

thing I can do to reciprocate?"

"Possibly," Poplar replied. "I understand that the insurance people mailed out that loan check this morning, so that regularly it should become part of Barstow's estate, and therefore not part of the insurance due Laura Thane. So if you have any influence with the public administrators in these parts, Green, I'm sure that my client—"

"*Your* client?" interrupted Bill Simmons, without bothering to take his arm from around Catherine Barstow. "You mean *my* client. She's got all the legal advise she needs right in the family. Haven't you Catherine?"

"The best," Catherine agreed tearfully.

AN EDITORIAL ASIDE

I was concerned when I realized, much too late to do anything about it, that I had inadvertently repeated the name of Mr. Walsh's novel in my comments, last month, on Frances and Richard Lockridge's A NIGHT OF SHADOWS (Lippincott, $3.00) and Thomas Walsh's A THIEF IN THE NIGHT (Simon & Schuster, $3.50).

My apologies. And an explanation.

These reviews were written in the midst of a moving, still in progress, which involved packing close to eight thousand books, and going through personal papers accumulated throughout the past thirty years. Apart from the fact that it is always interesting to discover what one wrote — or said — twenty or thirty years ago, it *is* somewhat difficult, under such conditions, to read your own copy as intelligently as you might otherwise do. Hence the error. *Mea culpa.*

My concern at the failure of the Lockridge novel to get across the personality of the man who was Dr. Jesus de Galindez has not lessened however. I imagine some of you will recall a New York politician, in April of 1956, promised to take up the disappearance of Dr. de Galindez with both Mayor Wagner and Police Commissioner Kennedy, following a meeting with Mr. Nicholas Silfa, then U. S. representative of the Dominican Revolutionary Party, and General Jose Asencio, then U. S. representative of the Spanish Republicans-in-exile. It is my impression that the politically astute gentleman would not have done so if Dr. Jesus de Galindez had in any way resembled the stereotype whom we meet in the Lockridge novel.

There are approaches which are (or were) permissible in the pulps which you do not expect in the writings of people such as Frances and Richard Lockridge who have given so much pleasure to all of us over these many years. I am not suggesting that the Galindezes of this world are at all times solely dedicated men and women. Unfortunately this is not so. There are exiles from the Caribbean in these days, as there were yesterday, whose motivations are unquestionably somewhat complicated.

But Dr. Jesus de Galindez was uniquely different from these. And it is to be regretted that the Lockridge novel, otherwise very pleasant reading, does not get this across . . . .

H. S. S.

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the devil you know...

by Ed Lacy

"The Devil you know is better than the Devil you don't know . . ."

Old saying.

STROLLING down Main Street to place a chalk mark on the tires of parked-cars as he did every two hours during the morning—Sheriff Kennedy watched Miss Julia leave the supermarket, thin arms hugging her bundles. With her head down against the mild wind, shoulder-length grey hair blowing with the breeze-hinting at former beauty, she would have walked smack into Kennedy's considerable belly if he hadn't stepped aside. Tipping his cap, he said, "Good morning, Miss Julia. Think this wind carries rain?"

Most folks in the Harbor considered Julia Anderson cracked: a sour old maid who had become a religious fanatic. But Kennedy, who only went to church on rare Sundays himself, thought it rather nice that the old girl spent every free second in church.

Ed Lacy is the author of more than a dozen novels including the recent ROOM TO SWING (Pyramid), TIME RUNNING IN (Avon), etc. Mr. Lacy, who lives in New York, here takes us to a small Long Island town, a village in reality, depending partly on summer people and men such as "that evil old fool."

"Oh!" She looked up, pale watery eyes which had once been a delicate blue—startled. "Mr. Kennedy—you gave me a fright. Always rush, rush, with me. Soon as I fixed breakfast for that evil old fool, I ran to church. Now my shopping, and he'll be yelling his head off if lunch is late. So you see, I have no time to even think about rain."

"When I was a boy, your father could tell the weather by merely spitting in the air and . . ."

"I've far too many bundles to stand around and talk of old times. I've no time for that."

"A sheriff's life is easier: I've time to help with your packages."

"Thank you, my arms are about ready to come off. Tell you, we don't have gentlemen any more. Not one of those fresh clerks in the market would. . . ."

Kennedy grinned at the old lady calling him a gentleman; he knew she had little use for him. During the last election she had announced (and loudly), "How can a man who never goes to church be trusted to uphold the law?" He was grinning for another reason: it always amused him that a prim old gal like Miss Julia had ended up as Mr. Davis' housekeeper. Years ago Mr. Davis' lush blonde "housekeepers" had been the talk of the Harbor. In fact, Davis had been an international playboy and drunk—until old age and a number of illnesses, including a bad heart, had invalided him back to his country house. At first, the village gossips had Mr. Davis marrying Julia before he died—he had offered her everything but marriage in her younger days. Then it was whispered he was willing her his fortune—although it was also rumored he had threatened to cut her off without a penny if she didn't stop pestering him for donations for this and that missionary.

Arms full, Kennedy walked slowly beside the old chatterbox as Miss Julia complained about Mr. Davis raising a great fuss over the morning toast, and other such vital matters. Kennedy didn't pay any attention to her nervous, shrill voice, nodding now and then. . . . until a bit of dust blew into his right eye. Blinking, he told Miss Julia, "Excuse me for cutting in, but my arms are full and there's something in my eye. Got a handkerchief? I never carry one, myself."

She rummaged through her ancient beaded bag, finally said, "Must have forgotten mine. Me leaving the house without a hankie — proves how crazy that

man is driving me with his nagging. Just bend down and let me pull the upper lid over the lower."

"Take it slow," Kennedy said, cautiously lowering his large head as Julie warned him to watch the big bag—the one with the eggs. She pulled the lid down, held it for a moment, and when she released it. The Sheriff's eyes teared.

"My goodness, the bigger the man the bigger the baby. I recall back in. . ." Miss Julia was off again, thin lips moving like a machine. She talked steadily 'till they reached the Davis mansion—an ugly old house so large Julia and Mr. Davis only used part of the ground floor. She said, "I've put you to all this bother, you're sweating. Come in for a lemonade."

"That's okay. I have to get back to checking cars and. . . ."

"Nonsense. Autos are but an instrument of Satan, they can wait. Please try my lemonade."

Inside the large, neat, kitchen she poured Kennedy a tall glass of cold lemonade, which he sipped slowly—he never drank the stuff unless it had rum in it. Julia told him, "Wait and see, soon as he hears me, he'll ring. Can be sleeping and he'll wake up to ring that bell, out of pure meanness. I tell you, the Devil took his soul long ago, replaced it with a. . . . Now I shouldn't talk this way, Mr. Davis has been complaining of chest pains since yesterday."

"Then I'd best go."

"Not until you finish your lemonade. I'll go in and look at him." She left Kennedy staring at his glass. He was pouring most of the drink back . . . when he heard the scream.

Kennedy lumbered into the bedroom to see Mr. Davis on the floor, scrawny pale body slightly ridiculous in an old fashioned night gown. A small table was overturned, and one hand clutched a plastic pill jar. Glancing at the staring eyes, the waxen face, Kennedy said, "Miss Julia, go into the kitchen."

"Satan finally claimed him!" Julia wailed. "Got out of bed and took the pills himself. Always said he'd be a suicide, the unholy. . . .!"

Kennedy put a thick arm around the hysterical woman, herded her into the kitchen. After phoning his office, he lit a cigarette, waited for his deputy and the doctor to arrive. Miss Julia sat at the white kitchen table, sobbing in her hands. Kennedy said, "Miss Julia, there are some routine questions I must ask. Think you can answer them, now?"

She dried her pinched face on a kitchen towel. "I think so, if

you will put that tool of Satan out of your mouth. I allow no smoking in my kitchen!"

"All right now, don't get excited," Kennedy said, dousing the butt in the sink. "What kind of pills were those?"

"I don't know the exact name, but a powerful heart stimulant. I was under strict orders from the doctor, that big city specialist, to never give him more than one at a time, and only one every 12 hours—even if he was suffering an attack."

"Now you mentioned suicide; I didn't know Davis was able to walk?"

"Oh he wasn't supposed to leave his bed, but he could walk a little. Sneaked into the bathroom plenty of times, once I caught him trying to open the liquor cabinet. Always contrary, Mr. Davis was."

"Yeah. Miss Julia, for my records, can you give me an exact accounting of how you and Mr. Davis spent the morning?"

"Well, I arose at seven, as is my custom, cleaned up, and made breakfast. He awoke at about . . . nine. I brought him his tray, the morning paper and . . . Told you the way he complained about the toast—always finding fault with somebody else. At half past nine I left him reading the paper, told him I was going to church, then do the shopping. I left fresh water on his bed table, went to church."

"Anyone else in church, Miss Julia?"

"In this village of sinners—as you well know, Mr. Kennedy?" She shook her head angrily. "But Father Henry was working in his garden. I remember waving to him, then walking around to the church entrance. I left after my usual hour of prayer and meditation, to do my shopping. That's when I met you."

Kennedy glanced at his watch —it was thirteen minutes before noon. "Thank you, Miss Julia. Now if you have the name and number of that specialist, I'd best be calling him."

While he was talking long distance, the Harbor's one doctor — who was also the County Medical Examiner — arrived with Kennedy's deputy. When Kennedy came into the bedroom, the doctor glanced up from the corpse, said, "Odd the pill bottle should still be in his hand. The drug completely relaxes the muscles — why an overdose causes death."

Kneeling awkwardly, the Sheriff poked at the plastic bottle with a pencil: it was loose in the cold hand. "Doc, would a couple of these pills really kill him?"

"Three, taken at once, would do the trick. With this type of

drug a lab test can practically give us the exact time of death. It coagulates the blood at the rate of. . . . Well, can't explain it to a layman."

"You make those tests, Doc. Fast as you can. Then phone me here." Kennedy left the deputy in the kitchen with Miss Julia while he nosed around the house, exploring rooms heavy with years of dust. In less than an hour the doctor called. "Davis died 230 minutes ago, or at about 9:55 A. M. — give or lose a minute or two. How come you're so interested in the time? In an ordinary suicide, like this, the. . ."

Kennedy sighed. "Doc, hurry back here with a hypo for Miss Julia, she's going to need a shot. Damn, sometimes wearing a badge can be rough. Hurry now." Kennedy went into the kitchen, sat across the table from Miss Julia, trying to form the right words. Finally he gave it up, asked bluntly, "Why did you murder him, Miss Julia?"

The deputy gulped. Miss Julia raised her weary face. "How dare you. . . .!"

"Miss Julia, it's no good. You didn't go to church."

"I spent an hour in church, as I do every day! Father Henry saw me. Do you doubt the word of a man of God?"

"No Miss Julia. Remember, I'm talking to you as the Sheriff, now. As you told me yourself, Father Henry waved to you from his garden. Then you went around to the front of the church, but you didn't go in. You doubled back here, gave Davis several pills in a glass of water, and when he was dead you pulled him out of his bed, placed the pill bottle in his hand. . . . to make it look like suicide, and went shopping. Even waited for me, brought me here with you. Why did you kill him?"

"I was in church! Everybody knows I go to church every morning without fail! I'm the only person who. . ."

Kennedy stroked her trembling hand. "No, Miss Julia, not this morning. And you shouldn't use the church for an alibi. You see, I know you couldn't have been in church: you weren't wearing a hat and you didn't have a handkerchief — how did you cover your head in church?"

For a long second her thin face seemed to tighten, then it went to pieces as she sobbed, "He was going to cut me from his will because I wanted to put his evil money to good use! The Devil takes many forms. I had to fight evil! I had to. . .!"

"Sure. Easy, Miss Julia," Kennedy said softly, squeezing her tiny hand.

the mirror of yin tang

by Charlotte and Dan Ross

As the ancient taxi hurtled through the maze of traffic in Bombay's busy streets its single passenger eyed the native driver with some alarm on his broad face and edged precariously near the rim of the back seat.

Mei Wong, the venerable Chinese art dealer, had never accustomed himself to the frantic driving habits of the Indian city. Although he had lived in Bombay since the end of World War II he rarely used taxis. But this afternoon it was an emergency that had made him break a set habit. He was supposed to be at his studio to meet Inspector Bannerjee of the Bombay Homicide Department at four o'clock. An overlong interview at the home of a client had kept him later than he expected and it was almost four now.

He had told the driver he was in a hurry and he now realized this had been a major error. From time to time the immaculately white-suited old man dabbed at his forehead with a linen handkerchief and fanned himself with the broad panama he held in his other hand.

Mei Wong, the elderly Chinese art dealer who has been living for years in Bombay (a city with a population of four million . . .), has never quite become accustomed to the ways of that port city which, perhaps more than any other city in India, can be so dangerous — for those who do not know its ways. . . .

Bracing his massive body as they turned a sharp corner into the wide avenue that led to the Imperial Hotel where he had his studio, Mei Wong flinched as they managed a narrow channel between a clanging street car and a creaking bullock cart. The hot afternoon was filled with the clamor of blatting horns, the sonorous rhythm of voices in many languages, and a continuous barrier of pedestrians.

Finally the taxi stopped in front of the Imperial Hotel and the beaming driver opened the door for Mei Wong to rather shakily emerge. Feeling it useless and perhaps even ungrateful to lecture the self satisfied young man for his reckless driving, he paid him and trotted quickly into the peace and shadowed quiet of the hotel's lobby.

Quickly taking the elevator to the fifth floor he hurried down the thickly carpeted corridor to his studio. Standing in front of the door was a tall ascetic-looking man with a short black beard.

Hurrying up to him Mei Wong extended his hand with a smile. "I am sorry to be late, Inspector Bannerjee. I hope you have not been waiting long."

The Inspector shook hands and returned the smile. "I had only just arrived."

Inside the big room which housed Mei Wong's Bombay Art and Curio Shop and which was filled with treasures of jade, china, precious silks and tapestries the two men seated themselves.

Inspector Bannerjee, who sat in front of Mei Wong's broad mahogany desk, frowned at the art dealer. "I hope you might be able to help me, Mei Wong. I'm puzzled. Charles Simpson wasn't the type to commit suicide. Yet he deliberately walked off that cliff to his death."

For a moment Mei Wong casually studied a tooled-leather book which was before him and which contained a number of entries in small, precise handwriting. Then he looked up at the Inspector.

He spoke quietly, his moonface quite expressionless. "What makes you think I can clear the mystery?"

"Because you were there when it happened," the Inspector said. "His house guest, weren't you?"

"Yes." Mei Wong folded his hands on his ample stomach. I was cataloging some oriental art pieces he'd just purchased."

"You must have noticed something about his manner to explain what happened." The dark, ascetic face of the Inspector was shrewdly studying in its ex-

pression. "The rumor he was a suicide has sent his company shares tumbling."

"Most unfortunate for his stockholders," Mei Wong commented.

"Unless the situation is cleared a lot of innocent people may be ruined."

Mei Wong looked thoughtful. "Strangely enough I think Simpson was murdered. But I very much doubt if we can prove it to the satisfaction of your department, Inspector."

"Anything will be helpful." Inspector Bannerjee leaned forward. "Just what do you know?"

Mei Wong picked up an elaborately carved ivory letter opener from his desk and held it in his hands. After a moment's deliberation he asked: "You remember Sheila Trent?"

The Inspector sat back in his chair again. "Yes, of course. She was Simpson's secretary for nearly a year before her suicide."

"That is correct," Mei Wong agreed. "I believe it was poison."

"Quite right," the dark man nodded. "It's been two years since the unhappy episode of Sheila Trent. I'd hoped the newspapers would have forgotten. But now they're dragging the story out again and trying to link it somehow with the death of Simpson."

"But of course the link is rather fascinating," Mei Wong pointed out. "As I recall she was a most attractive girl. Simpson hired her as his confidential secretary. It seems she fell in love with him, as sometimes happens in these cases. Simpson led her on and she broke her engagement to the nice young man whom she'd planned to marry. But the millionaire had a streak of cruel, arrogant ruthlessness and one day he told Sheila he was no longer interested. That there would be no marriage. The poor girl was so let down she made the dreadful decision to take her own life. No wonder the Bombay foreign colony chose to shun Simpson after that." Inspector Bannerjee shrugged. "Sheila Trent was ill-prepared to take care of herself in the situation. I was on the case and probed into her background. She'd only been in India a short time. She came out from England after her mother's death. Her father was a small time vaudeville performer she hadn't heard from in years. So there were no relatives to take an interest in what happened to her."

"Making her easy prey for a man of Simpson's type," Mei Wong sighed. "I didn't admire him although we did business over a long period. He was a leading collector of oriental

art and let no scruples stand in his way of acquiring whatever took his fancy. I was not happy about going to his home to do appraisals on a new lot of purchases but it was difficult to refuse. I had helped locate the pieces in Hong Kong."

"And you were staying at his villa on the outskirts of the city when it happened," the Inspector said. "It would help if you can recall anything or anyone of unusual interest."

"It was all very ordinary. Although I did take a fancy to one of Simpson's staff and had some interesting chats with him. A man called Furness, the head gardener."

"What about him?"

"Rather a strange man. Simpson had hired him only a few months ago. He had a positive genius with the grounds and a surprising knowledge about Simpson's art collection. He told me he'd come across a few good items himself at one period."

Inspector Bannerjee registered interest. "Can you recall the exact conversations you had?"

"Some of them," the art collector stared off into space a moment. "I remember one afternoon in particular. We talked. I said that I considered him something of a specialist in my field."

"I've had good stuff," Furness agreed with a strange one-sided smile. "Sold it whenever I needed cash. Only have one piece left that's worth anything. A silver mirror by Yin Tang. I'll dig it out of my trunk and have you tell me what's it's worth."

Mei Wong glanced at the Inspector. "Of course I told him I'd be delighted. Would buy it if we could agree on its value. The following day when I was working alone in the study the old man stepped in through the half-opened french doors and brought me the mirror. It was about four inches in diameter and of sparkling silver. The back inlaid with leaves of turquoise. I told him it was extremely valuable and asked if he wanted to sell it."

"And what was his attitude?"

"He came to no direct decision. But he moved across the french windows and stared out at the lawn where Simpson was taking an afternoon stroll. And then he turned to me and said: 'I may sell it later. I want to let Mr. Simpson look at it first. I think now might be a good time.' I watched as the old man went out and walked towards Simpson."

Inspector Bannerjee smiled wryly. "No need to say he could have gotten a better deal from you."

Mei Wong nodded. "I didn't

expect Simpson would offer the old fellow anything like what it was worth. I watched the two men in the bright sunlight as they talked about the piece. Even at the distance I could see the mirror glistening as the gardner dangled it before Simpson's greedy eyes. And somehow I felt it was a scene I'd encountered before."

"What did it make you recall?"

"It wasn't clear to me, just vaguely familiar. Then Simpson walked away from the gardner and disappeared out of sight in the direction of the path that led to the cliff. That was the last time I saw him alive. Minutes later two panic-stricken natives rushed up to the terrace with word that Simpson had vanished over the cliff. As they told it he'd deliberately walked over the edge to his death. They found his broken body on the rocks below."

The Inspector's keen eyes met those of Mei Wong. "You've still given me nothing that will help."

Mei Wong bent forward across his desk. "I understand Furness is no longer gardener at the estate."

"No. He's left the country altogether."

"He gave me a present before he left." The art dealer rose and moved across to one of the treasure-filled shelves at the opposite side of the room and came back with an exquisitely wrought silver mirror. "The Mirror of Yin Tang," he said.

"Furness was generous indeed to make you, such a valuable gift." The Inspector raised his eyebrows.

Mei Wong held the mirror before him and studied its delicate pattern. "He said he wanted me to have it. That it was no longer of any use to him." The old Chinese paused and then went on: "After he'd gone I thought of the afternoon I'd watched him and Simpson on the lawn together as they'd discussed the mirror. And it was then I remembered what the scene had reminded me of."

The art dealer went over to his desk and opening a top drawer took out a wrinkled section of newspaper. "This was wrapped around some material I received from a dealer in Australia the other day. As I unfolded it an advertisement caught my eye. And then I knew that my suspicions were correct."

Inspector Bannerjee took the paper and read the advertisement with its black border. The heading said:"Hypnotist Extraordinary! One week only!" Underneath it was a photograph of the man he'd known as Furness. He glanced up at Mei Wong

with disbelief: "Are you suggesting that this Furness hypnotized Simpson and made him plunge to his death."

Mei Wong inclined his head and said quietly. "I'm sure of it. It was the unusual way he held the mirror, the way he used it before Simpson's eyes as they talked. I'd seen it done before. It is a favorite means of focusing the attention of a hypnotic subject."

The Inspector stood. "But what was the motive for Furness to do such a thing?"

"You haven't finished with the advertisement," Mei Wong pointed to the newspaper. "In smaller print you will see the hypnotist's name—Stephen Trent!"

Bannerjee stared at the paper. "Of course, the father! The small time vaudeville actor."

"Yes. Sheila's father." Mei Wong put his slender hands on the polished surface of his desk. "Your department can easily confirm that. But for the rest, I'm afraid you will find it quite impossible to prove."

NEXT MONTH –

WE MEET HOPPY UNIATZ FOR THE FIRST TIME, AND LEARN OF THE "MERCHANTS OF DEATH"

in

THE SIMON TEMPLAR FOUNDATION

A SAINT STORY by LESLIE CHARTERIS

—in the May issue of THE SAINT MYSTERY MAGAZINE

you gotta be tough

by George Harmon Coxe

BARON let the telephone ring until he finished putting the platinum-rimmed studs in the stiff-bosomed dress shirt. When he finally laid the shirt aside and lifted the receiver he said: "Hello," without much enthusiasm in his voice.

"Paul," a thin, staccato voice said, "this is Frankie Alpert. I want to see you tonight."

"I don't want to see you," Baron answered flatly. "And anyway, I've got a date."

"Break it. This is bigger than any date."

"What makes it big?"

"I can't tell you over the phone but—"

"If it's about those bonds," Baron cut in, "tell it to the police. I'm out of that now."

"Be smart, Paul." Alpert's voice was sharp, urgent. "While you've got the chance. If you change your mind, come down to my place. Call me and let me know. Bayside 5291. I'll be here a couple of hours."

George Harmon Coxe, former National President of the Mystery Writers of America and long prominent in the field, is the author of the recent MISSION OF FEAR, MAN WHO DIED TOO SOON (both Knopf) and more than thirty novels. Here is the first of a series about Paul Baron — who had been a cop.

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Baron cradled the receiver gently, stared thoughtfully at nothing for a moment; then picking up his shirt, he slipped into it and stood in front of the mirror on top the chest of drawers while absent-mindedly his fingers fastened the studs, attached the collar and made a neat bow of the black tie.

Standing there, frowning at his image when he finished, he was a tall, lean figure with a wiry, flat-muscled frame and an alert, ready manner of holding himself that suggested an excellent co-ordination of brain and muscle. His face was longish, angular; his hair was straight and black, and although he was young, not thirty, his smoky blue eyes seemed wise, experienced.

The door buzzer interrupted him as he was putting on the waistcoat, and he buttoned it on his way across the living-room.

Three men stood in the hall, making a triangle with Detective Steve Hanauer the apex, a plain-clothesman on one side, and Powers, of the District Attorney's office, at the other.

Hanauer said: "Hello," sort of sheepishly. When Baron did not reply, he added: "Well, don't we get asked in?"

"Sorry," Baron said. "I've got a date and I was just going out."

"We won't keep you long."

"For what?"

"Well, we'd like to talk to you a minute. Maybe look around."

Baron smiled briefly at Hanauer; then he glanced at Powers and his eyes got hostile. "You can talk here. The look around is out anyway."

"Listen." Powers pushed forward. He was a short, slender man with a pale, sharp-featured face and cold gray eyes. Aggressive, callous, he was out to make a name for himself and he made no attempt to disguise his attitude. "That kind of talk won't get you anything but trouble. We come here in a friendly way to—"

"There'll never be anything friendly about your calling on me and we both know it. You came here with Steve to front for you so you could search the place. But—"

Hanauer's thick face reddened and he said, "Now wait, Paul. Be reasonable."

"—the answer is *No!*" Baron continued, still looking at Powers. "If it was Steve, yes. Because I know him and I trust him. But I've seen you in action before, Powers."

Powers' thin lips slacked off in a sneer and his eyes narrowed. "Never mind the kidding. I've got your number. I always said there was something funny about that Brewer job."

"The last time you said it," Baron answered unpleasantly, "you got your mouth slapped."

Powers colored and his lips worked silently for a moment. "Okey," he fumed. "You can hold me up. But you can't stop me."

"Just leave out the friendship and keep it strictly business," Baron said as Powers turned away. "Come back with a warrant."

Hanauer, still red-faced, shook his head sorrowfully. Baron smiled at him and said: "Sorry, Steve. I just don't like him."

When Baron strode through the apartment lobby five minutes later his face was grim, sombre eyes set in his frown. He stopped at the switchboard and said: "Call Bayside 5291 and say that Mr. Baron will be there in a few minutes," before he went out.

The Peacock Alley of the *Granada* featured subdued, expensive atmosphere, an almost endless straightaway of thick carpet and some really good oils on its walls. Paul Baron swung briskly down this softly lighted concourse until he came to a girl who got up from a high-backed tapestried chair to meet him.

She was a medium blonde with honey-colored hair. She wore a dark blue evening gown that matched her eyes, and a mink coat. Even without these she would have looked expensive. There was something about the way she stood up, the way she held her head and neck that gave an intangible yet definite impression of class and breeding; the sort of impression that many women try for and fail to achieve.

Baron said: "How late am I?" and stood close to her, taking one of her hands. His face was no longer grim. His smile was in his eyes and the sight of her kept it there, pulled his lips back so that his teeth flashed.

Janet Grainger said: "Not so very. Are we ready?"

The smile faded from Baron's eyes, but his lips held it and he said, lightly: "Don't hate me but I've got to break it, Jan. I told you it was a mistake to be a friend of mine."

Janet Grainger did not ask for reasons. She watched him silently. Her eyes said they liked him but they were very direct and concerned. There was reserve, a coolness in them, but when she spoke her voice held a warmth beyond words.

"Does that mean you're not going to Florida with us?"

"I hope not. But I might be able to straighten something out tonight and I don't know how

long I'll be."

"But you're not a policeman now," she said. And when Baron did not answer: "You don't believe anyone really thinks you were involved in that bond robbery?"

"Some do," Baron said gravely. "I've got to be sure."

His eyes softened as he watched her, then clouded as he sensed her disappointment. She was not angry with him. Hurt, rather. And he felt ashamed, as though he had made a promise to a child and was deliberately breaking it; felt this shame bring the blood to his face. His voice got a bit thick.

"We can go somewhere tomorrow night, can't we?"

"Of course." Janet Grainger smiled immediately, but not very genuinely. She nodded her head slightly, said: "Well—"

Watching her and grateful for her poise, the impulse came to Baron quickly. He grinned, his eyes sparkling and one brow cocked.

"How would you like a kiss?" he asked suddenly.

Her eyes were puzzled, then smiling like his own as her mood keyed to his. "I would," she said honestly.

Baron kept grinning, looked around. Then he remembered where he was and grumbled: "I guess you take enough chances with your reputation just being seen in public with a mug like me."

Janet Grainger said: "Meanie!" and took his arm as they started for the street entrance.

Baron put her in a cab, took the next in line and gave the driver a Westland Avenue address. The inner glow that always came to him when he was with Janet Grainger lingered, and he forgot about Frankie Alpert for a while and let his thoughts wander pleasantly.

He no longer tried to explain her liking for him. The daughter of P. T. Grainger, a crusty oldster who had bought and sold railroads and things when it was open season on such transactions, Janet had everything—town and country houses, the finest s c h o o l s, the choicest clothes, a constant rush of admirers. And he, in spite of a good education, had been a cop.

Baron grunted softly. A cop. A depression cop. There had been enough money left him by his father to put him through college and give him a start in business, but the crash had wiped out the remaining investments about the time he graduated. Judge Jennings, an old friend of his father's, had given him the idea, and after six months of job hunting in 1930

Baron was willing to try anything.

And because he was a cop, because he liked good clothes and knew how to wear them, he had met Janet Grainger. Detailed to the wedding reception when her brother was married, Baron was decked out in tails, and when the girl began to talk to him it was a half hour before he told her the truth. By that time she liked him.

Why she had been a partner to the friendship which had lasted two years, Baron was not sure. She had had no co-operation from anyone. At first her father had tried to discourage her; so had Baron, because he was honest—with her and himself. While he had been a cop they had met infrequently, as friends. Now that he had a little money of his own—

The cab stopped abruptly and Baron's thoughts snapped, switched to Frankie Alpert and bogged down in a slow mounting resentment. He paid the driver and walked with quick, forward-leaning steps through the vestibule to a barny foyer presided over by a red-haired youth at a switchboard who glanced up briefly and returned to his magazine.

Baron knocked three times on the door of Alpert's apartment on the fourth floor, then tried the knob. When it turned he pushed into a spacious, flossily furnished living-room, stopped still with a quick tensing of nerves as his gaze fastened on the man who lay in the center of the floor beside a cushion-back chair.

Without shifting his eyes, Baron felt behind him, closed the door softly. Slowly he advanced, eyes serious, troubled. Frankie Alpert was on his back, arms wide and legs bent sidewise. A small, baldish man in his middle thirties, with a rounded face that looked pale and composed, he wore an old-looking gray suit and in the left side of the vest there was a small, frayed hole. Around this a reddish stain dyed the fabric darkly.

Baron knelt motionless, staring. After a long moment he put out a hand to feel for a pulse. Then he heard a rustle of movement to one side. A sharp, low voice said:

"Stand up and stay quiet!"

For perhaps three seconds Baron's pose was rigid, arm half extended; then his head came around. He saw three pair of shoes standing in an inner doorway. His eyes slid up three pairs of trouser legs, one brown and two blue, to a leveled automatic, to three masked faces.

His mouth got tight and he said. "Where's the masquerade?" sardonically as he stood up.

The three men came into the room. They were all tall. One was slender and the other two were heavier, one with a look of muscular hardness to his body and the other with a bulging, fatty bulk.

The slender man held the gun, and stopped a few feet away. One man leaned beside the door, the other, the fatty-fellow, began to talk.

"Things have changed since Frankie called you."

"I see they have," Baron said dryly.

"And if you play ball with us it won't cost you anything but money." The man slid a thigh across the edge of a table. "This is the set-up. Write us a check for twenty-five grand and we'll hold you till we cash it. When we let you go you'll be clear."

"You're going to try and frame me for this kill, huh?" Baron's voice got bitter, disgusted. "You think you can make it stick, do you?"

"That's part of it. And if that don't click, we can frame you for an accomplice in the Brewer bond job—and that one will stick when the cops find the balance of those bonds in your apartment."

Baron's muscles tensed. Anger and resentment streaked through him as he remembered Powers' call, and he did not want to speak until he had control of himself. He turned slowly, dropped lazily into the cushion-back chair and stretched his legs straight out.

"So that's it?" he drawled finally. "When I was a cop and didn't have a dime all I had to worry about was my job. But when I get a little money I'm a push-over for a frame, huh?"

"Listen," the plump man continued. "We know all about you. A pull got you your appointment. You had a little better mental equipment than the average cop, and you were out to advance. Through luck—or maybe ability—you cracked a couple jobs that made publicity. The reporters went for you. You had personality. A new kind of a cop. You got into plain-clothes in a hurry and you were a first-grade detective with a reputation in three years. And then you muffed that bond job."

Baron's thoughts centered bitterly on the one failure against his record. Brewer and Company had been robbed of $125,000 in securities. Frankie Alpert had long been under suspicion as a dealer in hot bonds, and when some of the loot began to filter into the market, Baron and Powers had watched his office,

had caught a man in the corridor with a brief case full of bonds. Then, while Powers went into Alpert's office to telephone, this man had pulled a tiny automatic from a coat sleeve and held up Baron, made his escape down the fire stairs with the brief case.

What complicated things was the fact that about the same time an uncle of Baron's had died in Oklahoma and left him $200,000. The coincidence of Baron having money and letting the bonds get away from him was too much for Powers. The two had never got along. Now Powers expressed his opinion freely and in public. When Baron heard him say the uncle story was nothing but a gag, that Baron had allowed the fellow to escape, Baron had punched him in the mouth, had quit the force. It had been a mistake to quit under fire. He saw that later. But at the time he had been irked by his failure, by regulations and red-tape; he was young and he acted on impulse.

"So figure it out," the plump man said. "Alpert was under suspicion on that bond job. You got money all of a sudden—at just the right time. With those bonds in your apartment, and Alpert dead—"

Baron stood up, grim-faced, eyes cold and narrow. "I don't think you can make it stick," he said starting confidently for the door. "And I don't like the play. It stinks."

The plump man said, "Watch him, Vince!"

Vince stiffened in front of the door, squared off. Baron kept coming. When he got close Vince grabbed for him, and he sidestepped, drove a hard left to the head. Vince bounced from the door like a fighter against the ropes and came out swinging. Baron blocked a right, jabbed a left and crossed his right, spinning to meet the slender fellow with the gun.

The man had clubbed the automatic, and off-balance as he was, Baron missed his first punch. He saw the gun swing, ducked, tried to cover. Pain exploded in his brain as the gun barrel glanced from his head. He staggered, weaved away; then Vince caught him on the side of the head with a roundhouse right.

Baron went down. He got to his knees. Vince hit him again flush on the jaw and he went over on his side. A voice said: "That's enough," and Vince said: "This lug likes it. Don't you, baby?" He pulled Baron to his knees, slapped him twice, viciously, and stepped back.

Baron staggered erect, tried to raise his hands and failed. He

stood wavering, eyes clouded arms hanging limply. Vince put a plam on his chest and pushed him, unresisting, back into the chair.

"We can't make you sign a check," the plump man said when Baron's head cleared. "But we can take you out and ride you around for a couple hours, and that ought to be enough. The cops'll find the bonds; they'll find Frankie — and we'll see to it your fingerprints are on the gun that ironed him out. The operator downstairs saw you come in. He won't see you go out, because you'll go out the back way—the same way we came in.

"Maybe you can beat that kind of a set-up. But it'll cost you a damn' sight more than twenty-five grand to do it. And even if you do, what'll it get you? You'll never convince the public you didn't pull a fast one. You'll be a chiseler to most people—to the Grainger girl and her old man and all your fine friends—as long as you live."

"Don't be a chump," the slender man said smoothly. It's your only chance to get out."

Baron took out a checkbook and a pen. Regardless of his conscience, there was only one sensible thing to do. He might beat the frame but he could never completely clear himself of suspicion until he proved his case against these three men: and his only chance was to be free to fight.

One other thing decided him. He did not know Vince. But something about the plump man's mouth and fatty jowls was familiar. Of the slender man, he was sure. His voice did it, awakened latent memory. That quiet, oily voice; the smooth olive skin beneath the mask; the slender, natty figure. This was the man who had pulled the gun from a sleeve three months ago and started all of Baron's trouble.

"What happens if I pay?" he said finally. "What do you do with Alpert?"

"The same thing that was done to Dan Murphy," the man said, referring to an alderman who had disappeared one night a year ago and had never been found. "And I'll pick up the bonds. All we want is a profit; the rest of them are too hot to handle now."

Baron wrote the check. When he held it out, his other hand touched a bloody lump over his ear, felt of the swelling on his jaw, and he said: "But don't think I won't try to get it back."

When the sedan stopped a half hour later after a twenty minute ride, Baron began to con-

centrate. He was not tied, but he was blindfolded and had to be led from the car. He was walked across a sidewalk, up six stone steps. He took two paces to another step and then there was linoleum under his feet and the heat of a building rushed out to meet him as an inner door opened.

The air was stuffy and dry and the smell of banana oil got in the back of his throat. To his left a radio announcer was saying: "And now Jack Yarman gives you his own original arrangement of that old-time favorite, Dinah. Give, Jack." The dance band blasted out its introduction and Baron began to climb stairs.

At the second floor they turned right, walked a few feet, turned right and climbed to the third floor. At the end of this hall someone knocked three times rapidly, paused, knocked twice slowly. A door opened but no word was spoken. Baron was pushed across a thinly carpeted floor, down a short hall to another room. Then Vince said:

"Sit down while we tie you up!"

Baron sat down, right on the floor, felt his ankles and wrists being bound. A new voice said: "I guess he's okey," and the blindfold was taken from his eyes.

Baron blinked, glanced about a room that was obsolutely bare of furniture and had bars on the inside of the lone window and shutters outside. Vince and the slender man, still masked, watched him from the doorway. A squat, muscular fellow who looked like an Italian and had close-cropped hair and a flat nose, stood in front of them.

A tight smile warped Baron's lips and his voice was caustic. "Where's your mask?" he asked the squat man.

Vince said: "If the check's okey you oughta be out by eleven in the morning." And to the squat man: "If he gets noisy, Distasio, go in and crown him."

The light went out and the door closed. Baron made himself as comfortable as he could and stared into the darkness.

Presently he heard the roar of an outward bound passenger train. It sounded very close and he glanced at his strapwatch. The luminous hand and numbers showed it to be 10:34.

He rolled over to the window, got to his knees and pushed bound hands through the bars against the window pane. He tested the bars, found them solid, and lay down on the floor again. After a while a freight train chugged past. A little later there was another; then a swift moving train, an incoming pas-

senger. At 12:04 another outward bound flyer roared past.

Baron dozed fitfully throughout the night, and shortly before eleven in the morning he heard voices outside the door. A key clicked and Distasio came in with a blindfold.

"Gotta put him on," he said stolidly. When he had finished he added: "Hokey," and began to untie Baron while two men came into the room.

Vince's voice announced: "The check was good."

Baron did not answer, did not say a word until he was shoved out of the car twenty minutes later and felt the slush of a pavement under his feet.

By the time he got the blindfold off a small black sedan was disappearing around a corner. Mentally tabulating the number, he glanced about a deserted narrow street lined on both sides by squalid tenements; then set out for the corner at a brisk walk, buttoning his coat at the neck over the stiff shirt front of his dinner jacket.

There was a drug-store two blocks away and Baron borrowed a pencil and began to jot down a column of figures, his eyes serious, thoughtful under knotted brows. When he had finished he stepped into a telephone booth.

"Harry," he said a moment later. "Paul Baron. Yeah. I've got a job."

"A cash job?" Harry's flip voice answered.

"A cash job. Meet me at the corner of Spruce and the Avenue, and you'd better bring a gun and a sap."

"You sound tough."

"Sometimes," Baron lipped, "you gotta be tough."

"Okay," Harry said. "Anything you say as long as it doesn't cost me my license."

Harry Nixon was in his early thirties, a competent-looking fellow with reddish hair and greenish eyes that were very direct and naturally suspicious, as though he doubted everyone and life in general. He was waiting on the corner when Baron's cab drew up, and when he climbed in he tossed over a folded newspaper, said: "Have you seen it yet?"

Baron read one paragraph under the one column head and his face grew taut, his eyes got brooding, miserable. He cursed just once, a vehement, bitter cures and said:

"So the police, led by Assistant District Attorney Powers, found the missing bonds in my apartment. They crossed me."

Nixon said: "Want to tell me about it?" And when the taxi stopped in front of Alpert's

apartment house five minutes later he had the story.

Baron did not bother to knock at the fourth floor door. He tried the knob, found the door unlocked and pushed into the living-room with Nixon at his heels. Nixon closed the door and they both stood there a moment as though waiting for something to happen.

"Well," Nixon said finally, "they got Frankie out. That's a help."

He crossed to an inner doorway, disappeared around the corner of the hall. Baron followed absently, lost in the turmoil of his throughts, until he reached the bedroom. Then Nixon said one word, breathed it rather, in a long exhalation:

"——!"

Frankie Alpert was crumpled in a heap at the side of the bed. A blood spattered sheet partly covered the body, as though he had grabbed it as he fell; and there was more blood on the carpet opposite an ugly hole in the back of his head. He stopped beside the body, turned to fix those cold doubting eyes on Baron.

"Now I know why us private dicks get such bad reps," he said finally. "It's playin' around with guys like you."

Baron moved before Nixon finished. A look of bewilderment twisted his lean face, but his actions were crisp, purposeful. Three long strides took him to a closet. He jerked open the door, began to paw over the suits that hung there. When he turned around his jaw was slack.

"It's gone! That gray suit he had on last night." He wet his lips, dropped down on the bed, spoke in a dull monotone. "Somebody pulled a job like that about six months back. A blank cartridge, some ketchup on a vest. The sucker bit. There was no motive, but he was an ignorant wop and he fell for it.

"So did I. Only they rigged it right. They put a hole in the vest and stained the cloth around the hole. Frankie played dead and they stuck me up before I could touch him. And Frankie tied in with those bonds. And it was those planted bonds that had me worried most. Hell, what a set-up!"

"Something went sour," Nixon offered. "It looks like a straight plant to me. They wanted your dough. They'd've taken the bonds too. Even if they were hot. And today Frankie'd been alive and what could you do? You couldn't squawk. There'd be no proof. Nobody'd believe you, and you'll only show yourself up for a sap, a sucker for all the wise guys in town.

"Only somebody muffed one.

Maybe the cops beat 'em to your place and they couldn't lift the bonds." Nixon went to one knee beside Alpert's body, lifted an arm.

"Hell," he rapped. "This guy ain't been deal long!"

Baron stood up, circled the bed. His face was dark now and there was a bad look in his eyes.

"I'm no doctor," Nixon added quickly. "But he isn't stiff yet. He hasn't been gone more'n a couple hours. Three at the most.

He stood up, shook his head. He looked at Baron and when he spoke his voice was quiet, regretful, but very firm.

"Right now this looks a lot tougher than the frame. I believe you because I know you; but a lot of people won't. I'll play if I can, but I've had my license quite a while and I'd like to hang on to it. What're you gonna do?"

Baron looked right at Nixon and there wasn't much expression in his face. Just a tightness of the mouth and two reddish spots on his cheekbones.

"I've got one chance. If I find the house and get the Distasio punk I'll maybe have an alibi for this kill. I might get lucky with the bond frame."

He took an envelope from his pocket. the envelope with the figures scribbled on the back, and handed it to Nixon. "There's plenty of lead."

"It looks like a puzzle to me."

"The street is cobblestone," Baron said grimly. "I think it ends beside the railroad right-of-way; anyway the trains go pretty close. Outbound passengers passed it at 10:34 and 12:04. Check with the dispatcher and find out where the Ten-thirty and the Midnight Limited should be at that time.

"The window is shuttered. Walk the right-of-way and see if you can spot it. If you get the street you'll get the house. Six stone steps"—Baron traced his finger down the numbers on the envelope—"two paces to a vestibule. Inside you'll smell banana oil—maybe the radiators have just been painted. There's eighteen steps to the second floor right turn, four paces, fifteen steps to the third floor and twelve paces to a door on the left."

Baron hesitated, eyes grave. "There's five hundred bucks in it for you if you find it."

"That's one part I can understand," Nixon said. "And what's *your* play?"

"I'm going to take a chance and see the D. A. before some cop gets the idea of trying to drag me in. Forget Alpert. If they find him now they'll hold me without bail and I'll be washed up. If he stays covered

up here I might get some time to work."

District Attorney Wardman tapped a gold pencil in staccato measures on the desk top and listened patiently to Baron's carefully deleted story. He was a big man, plump, but carrying his weight well in a stiffly dignified way. His gray hair was thin on top and thin-rimmed glasses framed his dark eyes. When Baron finished, he took a cigar from a heavy-looking humidor and began to manicure the end.

"It's pretty hard to believe," he said, without looking up. "Somebody kidnaps you, makes you write a check, and promises to recover the bonds planted in your apartment. The bonds aren't recovered because Powers comes back with the police in time to get them."

"That's the only way it can be figured," Baron said, "unless they wanted the plant to stick, and I don't think that was in the act."

"And what do you want me to do?"

"Call off the bloodhounds for a few hours and give me a chance to find that house."

Wardman rolled the unlighted cigar around his mouth, cleared his throat.

"That's a lot to ask, Baron. You admit you can't identify the men behind this—except the one in the house. And planted or not, the bonds were found in your place, Against this fact you offer me an unverified story."

Baron stood up and opened his coat. The stiff shirt-front was stained with spots of blood from the wound over his ear. His jaw was still swollen; his dinner jacket was badly wrinkled, his tie was askew; his unshaven face was hard and angry.

"Do I look as if I was clowning?"

Wardman rolled the cigar some more and looked annoyed.

Baron stepped to the desk, put his hands down flat and leaned forward, holding his weight on his stiffened arms. His voice was cold, reasonable and he didn't look young any more.

"Then put it another way. I didn't have to come here, but I came. All right, pinch me. What will it get you? On the bond charge they'll have to set bail. I'll get out anyway. But if I have to do it that way, and I crack this thing—and I will, you're gonna take one hell of a riding, Wardman. These next few hours are the ones I want. Let me have them and tomorrow morning you can have your inning—if you need it."

Baron was hard to doubt when he talked like that, and Wardman frowned, put the cigar on the edge of an ashtray, clasped his hands on the desk and stared at them, pushing his lips in and out. Then he picked up the cigar and set his jaws firmly on it.

"Be here at nine o'clock tomorrow morning," he said brusquely. "It's a hell of a funny way for me to be doing my job, but I'd rather give you a few more hours now than have you bellyache afterwards. Don't be late."

Baron stopped at the door. "And keep Powers off my back."

"He's all right in his way," Wardman said defensively.

"In a nasty way, yeah," Baron chafed.

It was quite dark when Baron got out of his taxi at the corner of Marshall and Grove Street shortly after six o'clock. The air was crisp with a still cold, and Harry Nixon had his chin hunched down in his coat and was stamping his feet on the curb while he waited. As Baron paid the driver, another cab slid past and Nixon's alert eyes studied it narrowly, watched it pull into the curb in the middle of the block.

"Looks like you had a town dick on your tail," he said dryly, nodding towards a thick-set fellow who got out of the cab and sauntered across the walk to peer into a lighted jewelry store.

Baron said, "Come on," and stepped into the drug-store.

Presently the thick-set man sauntered past the windows and crossed the street. Baron muttered something away down in his throat, said:

"Go tell him he might as well come inside where it's warm."

Nixon went out. Baron stepped into a telephone booth and called Police Headquarters.

"If I've got to have a tail," he said caustically when he had identified himself, "I might as well somebody I like. Send Hanauer if he's there. I'll wait for him and he can call this other guy off." He gave the address of the drug-store and hung up.

The plain-clothesman came in with Nixon and said hello a bit sheepishly. Then the three of them moved over to the soda counter and dark coffee and waited around for about twenty-five minutes until Hanauer popped out of a taxi and came inside.

The plain-clothesman went to meet him, said something and went out. Hanauer come over grinning. "What's the idea?" he asked.

Baron tried to return the grin

but his face couldn't quite make it. He liked Hanauer. They had worked together before, and Baron knew he was a good cop. He was short, stocky, with a lot of shoulders and a broad, squarish face. Wrinkles robbed his clothes of whatever style they may have had, but in his kind of work it didn't matter. He'd been in the game quite a while and he knew the percentages, and he was never tough unless he had to be; then he was pretty good at it.

"I'd rather have you along than that other guy, that's all," Baron grumbled.

"It's all right with me, Paul," Hanauer said.

"Where's this place?" Baron asked Nixon.

"Four blocks down — by the railroad like you thought."

Baron went out to the sidewalk and climbed in his taxi which had waited, unasked, at the curb. Nixon got in, and when Hanauer hesitated, Baron said:

"Come on. There's no sense in hiring two cabs. The taxpayers get stuck enough as it is."

Nixon lit a cigarette and said: "Now I know why you were first-grade so soon. The train time gave me the start, and from the right-of-way there were only a couple places with shutters. After that it was easy. You had everything on the nose; steps, banana oil and all. Hell, even the radiators had just been painted."

Hanauer said: "Do I just ride, or can I talk too. What is this anyway?"

Baron related the same story he had given the District Attorney. "And if I'm lucky," he finished, "maybe we'll get enough to satisfy Wardman."

"Shouldn't need luck," Hanauer said and his voice was frankly admiring. "That was smart, Paul, and there ought to be a payoff on it. I wouldn't've thought of all that."

"You were never in this kind of a jam," Baron growled.

The radio beyond the door to the left of the narrow stairway was still tuned to a dance band; and again the smell of banana oil was in Baron's throat, resurrecting the memory of the night before. Anger and resentment smoldered insidiously within him as he moved to the stairs. His lean face was that of a man older than his years.

He counted the steps automatically as he went up ahead of Hanauer and Nixon. The turn at the top, the next flight, then the walk to the rear of the hall. Hanauer got his gun out and shifted it to his overcoat; Nixon unbuttoned his suit coat.

"Let me—" Hanauer began.

Baron caught the detective's fist as he raised it to knock. Shaking his head he said, softly: "I want to be sure and get in." Three quick knocks and two slow ones had gained an entrance the night before and he repeated them now, stepping back slightly as he finished.

Beyond the door there was no sound for several seconds; then a key clicked in the lock and the knob turned. When the turning stopped Baron hit the panel with his shoulder.

The door swung open, bounced back from the man who started to open it. Baron kept his feet, kept driving in until he fell over Distasio who was sitting on the floor, wide-eyed, blood coming from his flat nose where the edge of the door had smacked him.

Distasio scrambled to his feet, and Baron helped him, pushing him off balance until he had the fellow backed against the wall. After that, Baron forgot himself.

He was not ordinarily vindictive. His disposition was naturally good-humored and as a cop he had been tolerant of many things. He was not exactly vindictive now. Rather his assault was simply the release of emotions heretofore pent up and futile—and he was young.

He hit Distasio with a straight left and the fellow swung back. Baron stepped inside the punch and rocked the close-cropped head with a right cross. He was still boring in when Hanauer grabbed him and yelled:

"Take it easy. If this is the guy, all right. But I got a job and a family."

Baron stepped back and dropped his hands. He was breathing hard, his face still twisted with the explosive rage. As he relaxed he was annoyed at his lack of self control.

"This is the guy," he said defensively.

"I donno wat you talk about," Distasio said, wiping his nose.

"Never saw me before, huh?"

Distasio shook his head and his little eyes were savage, glaring. "No."

"I was never in here, was I?"

"No."

Baron told Hanauer to go see if there was a barred room in the flat, and when Hanauer came back and said there was, Baron continued with biting directness.

"Remember what he says, Steve. It's important. And you're a witness. He says I was never here before. You heard him." He glanced at Distasio. 'But a fingerprint man will prove differently. If I wasn't here I couldn't leave prints. I haven't touched anything but the door knob. But last night I put both

hands on the window of that inner room. Those prints'll prove my story."

He grunted, measuring Distasio. "You know now, don't you? You know what kidnapers get, don't you? Life! Now who was in with you? Who hired you? Or are you gonna take the rap alone and have your bones rot in a cell where you—"

Distasio's reaction caught Baron flat-footed. It was a sort of spontaneous explosion of movement where he did two things at once: He yelled: "You better come!" and he lowered his head and charged, both fists swinging.

After that the sequence was blurred for Baron. The first punch caught him high on the chest, spun him around and thereby saved his life when a gun cracked and a slug spattered into the wall a foot from his head.

He didn't know where the shot came from, and he had no time to look. He ducked Distasio's second swing. As he got his chin behind his shoulder and braced himself to meet the man's charge, a voice cracked. "Take Mario, Harry!" Then the room rocked with the roar of guns fired in two distinct salvos.

Baron had to keep working on the raging Distasio. He struck twice with his left, trying to get away. He had his right cocked when Hanauer said:

"Get 'em up, mister!"

Distasio stopped, stiffened. His gaze slid past Baron, widened, became fixed. When his hands began to lift, Baron turned around.

Hanauer stood in the center of the room, his feet wide apart and his service revolver pointed at Distasio. Nixon was lowerin a .38 automatic and watching a far corner of the room. A closet door stood open here, and on the floor, wedging the door, was the slumped figure of Vince. Leaning against the wall, arms hanging limply, was a slender, olive skinned man. There was an automatic on the floor beside his left shoe.

Nobody said anything. There wasn't a sound but the slender man's loud, labored breathing. Nixon kept watching him. Vince lay very still. He was on his face and stomach, and a red stain spread quickly over the floor beside his head. Blood began to drip from the slender man's fingers and he lifted the hand, stared curiously; then moved the hand to his chest and clamped it there. Finally he pushed out from the wall, staggered a step forward and flopped into a nearby chair.

Baron blew out his breath, became conscious of the sweat on

his lip, a shaky unsteadiness of muscle that was akin to weakness. "What a break," he said thinly, looking at Hanauer, "that I decided to let you ride with us. They were in the closet, huh?"

Hanauer nodded.

"When the guy yelled I guess they thought they'd better make their play. They knew he'd squawk if they didn't." Hanauer took a breath and picked up his felt hat which had been parted at the crown by a jagged furrow. "I happened to have my hand on my gun, and the big guy wasted his first shot at you." He stole a glance at Nixon. "You're pretty handy with that thing of yours, too."

He backed away, told Nixon to watch Distasio and turned to the slender man.

"How's it, Mario? The chest, huh?"

"I'm through," the man said weakly. "If you got any questions you'd better hurry up and spring 'em."

Baron went quickly to Mario's side. He knew this man and he realized how important to him was the fellow's story. At that Mario spoke first.

"We weren't going to cross you," he said. "All we wanted was the dough. But the cops beat us to it, and then—"

"Start at the beginning," Baron pressed. "You're the guy that Powers and I caught, that pulled the gun on me three months ago."

"Yeah," Mario said. He lifted dull eyes towards Hanauer. "He's right. It was level. I had the gun and I'd've plugged him if he rushed me. Vince and I pulled the Brewer job. Alpert handled the stuff for us.

"We framed you last night and when the cops got the bonds there was nothing to do but go through with it. We were gonna take the 25 G's and grab a powder."

"And you rubbed out Alpert?"

"Alpert!" Hanauer echoed. "When?" How do *you* know, Paul?"

Baron explained quickly and Hanauer's eyes got serious and reproachful. His voice was sour. "You held out."

"And so would you!" Baron argued. "Where'd I be if you knew before? In the click! You oughta be glad that—"

"All right, all right," Hanauer said grudgingly.

"That wasn't in the act either," Mario choked out. "But after we got the dough this morning, Frankie wanted half—because he lost the bonds. He tried to pull a gun and Vince let him have it."

"And where's the dough now?" Baron wanted to know.

"We turned it over to a

mouthpiece in case we got caught. We were gonna hide here till tonight and then—"

"What mouthpiece?"

"Kohler."

"Dana Kohler," Hanauer said. And then Baron knew why the plump man in the mask had been familiar the night before.

"He was in on it, huh?"

"He didn't have anything to do with the bonds," Mario protested. "He just worked for Alpert, and when Alpert got the idea of a frame, Kohler helped rig the set-up. That's all."

Hanauer exhaled n o i s i l y, grunted: "Well, I guess that does it." He looked down at Mario who had slumped in the chair, and felt for a pulse. "He's still alive. If we get him to a hospital maybe he'll sign a statement. But anyway you're clean, Paul."

"Clean," Baron repeated, and there was a new note in his voice. Hanauer glanced at him. The change was quite apparent.

One minute Baron's face had been pinched, gray, and heavy with beard and fatigue. Now there was color at his cheekbones and his eyes were relieved and held a curious glint of satisfaction. "For the first time in three months I can forget those bonds."

"Yeah," Hanauer said. "I guess that's everything."

"Not quite," Baron said. "I've got to see Kohler."

"He can wait," Hanauer scoffed. "He ain't important now. An accessory to extortion but even that'll be hard to prove. Maybe he'll get disbarred but—"

"That part can wait," Baron said. "But I'm no big time Charlie. He's got my twenty-five grand and I want it, and if I don't get tough and collect, every grafter in town will lay awake nights figuring out how to take me for a few more grand."

When Baron passed his apartment house on the way downtown, he saw a big coupe parked at the curb and told the taxi driver to stop. Janet Grainger was sitting in a wing chair when he came into the room.

Without moving she looked at him in a moment of study. Her eyes remained anxious, but she did not ask for details, she just said: "I was worried. Are you all right?"

Baron nodded.

"But you're not going to Florida with us tomorrow?"

"I can't. I'll have to stay around a few days, but maybe I can fly down later."

He stepped towards her, stopped beside the chair. He was not a pretty sight. His shirt was ruined, his clothing was rumpled and his face was sweat-streaked

and dirty. In spite of this he looked young again and there was laughter in his voice, and his eyes wèr smiling.

"Still like me?" he asked.

"Yes," Janet Grainger said. "But don't ask me why. We had a date to night, didn't we?"

"Oh—" Baron looked concerned.

"And it's my last night and I think it would be nice if—"

"If I skip the shower," Baron cut in. "I can be ready in about seven minutes."

"Skip the shower."

It was exactly seven minutes when Baron came back to the living-room. His fact glistened with a freshly scrubbed look — except for the lump on his jaw— and he was immaculate in a dark gray sack-suit. "I've got one more call to make." he said, "but it won't take long."

Baron kidded good-naturedly with the night elevator boy on the way up to the third floor of the office building on Congress Street, and he walked down the marble-floored corridor with a faint whistle on his lips.

Dana Kohler was barricaded behind a massive flat-topped desk and when Baron swung into the room without knocking, he looked up angrily, half rose from his chair. For just a moment he held the pose, big body bent, mouth gaping and sudden alarm mirroring from his eyes; then a frown slashed into his thick-looking skin and he dropped back in his chair, and said, blusteringly:

"Hello, Baron. What's on your mind?"

Baron came up to the desk. He was still smiling, and had the look of a man extremely well pleased with life. There was nothing threatening in his manner except an electric glint in his smoky blue eyes.

"Dough," he said blithely.

"Dough?" parroted Kohler uneasily.

"Dough. Twenty-five thousand bucks."

"Don't be silly."

"What's silly about that kind of money? And I'm in a hurry. We've got Vince and Mario and I want the money they passed you."

"I haven't any money," Kohler protested hurriedly. Then, blustering again: "And if I had I couldn't give it to you. It'd be clients' money—"

"Listen," Baron cut in curtly. "Right now I'm in a good humor. Don't spoil it. I've had a hard day, and I'm still a little irritable. If I've gotta be tough, okey. But don't rib me about my dough. You haven't any clients' money. Vince and Mario are dead."

As he finished, Baron reached

for a brief case that lay on the desk. He picked it up, started to unstrap it. Then he got another surprise. Kohler had a Sunday punch. He let it go as he growled and came from the chair, and it started from the floor and ended solidly right over Baron's left eye.

Baron wasn't hurt much, but there was power behind the blow and he was knocked back, nearly went down. Kohler yanked open a drawer. Baron charged forward in time to slap the gun to the floor as it flashed upward. He was still smiling as he leaped around the corner of the desk. He ducked another right, jabbed a left twice, and as Kohler straightened up, caught him with a right hook.

Kohler went down on his haunches, sat there like a Buddha blinking dull eyes. Baron tried to lift him, but the fellow was pretty heavy so he let him sit there and picked up the brief case.

The money was inside, in five hundred dollar bills. So was a black mask.

"Thanks for my dough," he said, backing towards the door. "I'll take the mask too, and then you won't need a receipt."

Janet Grainger looked at Barron curiously as he got in the coupe.

"It didn't take you long. Is everything all right?"

"Everything is swell."

"And we're really having a date?"

"Well—" Baron snapped on the dome light and grinned as he pointed to his left eye which had a very definite bluish cast at the outside corner. "Can I go this way?" he said hopefully.

Janet Grainger cocked her head in a gesture of mock study. She held the pose for another second or two, smiling just a little, lips parted, eyes shining. Then she leaned forward and kissed him gently on the bruised eye.

"Why not?" she said, settling back on the seat. "Bring the eye along too."

AN INSIDE ALIBI

A Canadian criminal confessed in court, the other month, that he had removed a bullet from his own abdomen and later replaced it with one of different caliber, in an effort to establish an alibi in an armed robbery case. He had been shot by the police in the course of the robbery. Once in jail, he'd reopened his gunshot wound and inserted the alibi slug. (There is no explanation of how this was available to him.) There was however an infection, and the bullet was removed in the jail infirmary when he later complained of pain.

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the vanished man

by Melville Davisson Post

It was a mere courtesy that brought Colonel Braxton into the Berkley case.

Mr. Evert Brewster, who had come from Pittsburgh on the matter, was not familiar with the country, and when he asked Colonel Braxton to go with him to the Berkley farm, the attorney could not well refuse. It was some miles out of the little city. But the day was fine and the roads under the summer sun were hard.

It was the disappearance of Captain William Berkley that had brought the Pittsburgh attorney down. He had his bag beside him in the carriage, for he would return north on a river boat directly from the Berkley place.

The landing could be seen at some distance from the point where the turnpike crossed the hilltop above the house: a mere platform from which a rowboat took one out to the steamer in the river. The main channel at this point was perhaps the deep-

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Melville Davisson Post has been called one of the most important story writers this country has ever had. A lawyer AND a writer, he was warmly interested in the South he knew and loved and in its traditions—and its problems. There have been few writers who have so successfully evoked the very special and undeniable charm of the Old Virginia about which he wrote. H.S.S.

From: THE SILENT WITNESS, by Melville Davisson Post.
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Melville Davisson Post.

est on the Ohio, but the long slope to the shore was shallow, and the river boats could not come in.

It was a model stock farm that the two lawyers looked down on from their carriage: clean and well fenced, with flocks of sheep at pasture.

It had been practically abandoned land when Berkley bought it; grown up and waste. What it now was represented what the will and vigor of one man could do. Berkley had got it for a small sum when he came with his strange companion from the South.

He was, Colonel Braxton thought, a gentleman adventurer at the end of his resources and also at the end of life.

The person with him he could not precisely classify.

He seemed neither an equal nor a servant. Colonel Braxton remembered when the two persons had come in to see him: a dapper, little, aged gentleman with a military manner, and a big, dark man, sturdy and powerful in the vigor of a youth that remained.

The latter looked like a sort of overseer, common in the South. He had the color of an octoroon; but the usual markings were not about the man. His hair was straight and his features, in a manner, aquiline. There was force and determination in him, and one could see that he managed for the two in all practical affairs.

He towered over Berkley, as if he interposed, in his strength and vigor, to care for the aged gentleman against the world. It was a strange and intriguing relation, that could have no other than some dramatic adventure for it origin.

They had come in, soon after their arrival, to see Colonel Braxton about the title to the land.

Berkley had bought it with no thought for a lawyer's service, and it now appeared, from the wording of the deed, that he had got only a life estate. Upon Berkley's death, the property would revert to the former owner.

The transaction had been with an agent for the owners at Pittsburgh, a fellow passenger on the boat North, who had somehow managed to discover what Berkley sought.

It was a willful and premeditated deception.

The owners held the land in fee, and there was no reason thus to convey the life estate only. But the house was unoccupied, the lands grown up, and the price paid down by Berkley small.

When Colonel Braxton pointed out the deception in the deed, the big, belligerent creature with the little captain had wished to fight, to go into the courts, to force a title.

But the dapper little captain had only laughed.

What did it matter! He wished the lands only for his life. He had no one to consider. Whither the property passed after he was dead was of no importance.

But a little later he seemed to have acquired a somewhat changed intent. He sent for Colonel Braxton and asked him to draw a paper putting the conduct of the property, legally, into the hands of Horton (for thus was the big creature with Berkley named), making over to him all the returns from it during Berkley's life, except what the little captain should require for his personal use. It was a comprehensive sort of deed, vesting in Horton all control and authority and all profits from the land. It had puzzled Colonel Braxton when he drew it.

Out of what motive did this act issue?

Colonel Braxton had reflected on the matter while he sat in the parlor of Berkley's house to formulate the paper. And it was for this reason, perhaps, that he had noticed with such care all the details about the place.

There was clearly no quality that one could call foresight in the dapper little captain, standing before the fire in that room, on the brick hearth, between the two big andirons.

And about the room there was no article, no picture, no bit of heirloom that seemed related to a former family, or a former status or manner of life. For such evidence, Colonel Braxton had searched the room. But there was nothing except the ancient furniture that had passed with the unoccupied house to its new owner.

Yet Berkley had uttered one significant remark that day.

Colonel Braxton now recalled it, sitting in the carriage on this summer afternoon with the Pittsburgh attorney, Mr. Evert Brewster. When Berkley signed the legal paper turning over the property to Horton, he had made a gesture as of abandonment; as of one going free of a thing he loathed.

"The earth depresses me," he had said. "It contains for me, sir, the only element of dread in death. To be covered in the earth! It is the whole horror in the idea of dissolution. If one could be exposed to the vultures, in the manner of the

ancients; or sent out to sea, like the Vikings, in a sinking ship; or burned in a great pyre of spice woods and his ashes scattered to the winds . . . death, sir, would be a thing to laugh at!"

He got up laughing at it, himself. But Colonel Braxton felt that behind the laugh the speech issued from some primordial feeling.

And the remark had remained in Colonel Braxton's memory.

There was, however, a commonplace, practical side to that legal paper. Horton had gone to work on the run-down property with a tireless energy. He had put the old house in order, maintained Berkley in it like a gentleman. And he had a care for this that the solicitude of a woman could not have equaled.

The old gentleman remained—the dapper little captain, elegant and careless—and the house he lived in was kept up to the standard of that manner. The lands, too, were cleared of brush, fenced, and stocked with sheep. The wool was sold down the river. The immense industry of Horton was inconceivable. And he managed thus to make a waste, worn-out property that would not yield its taxes support the house, with some considerable return beyond it.

There was a bit of money, too, for Captain Berkley's foibles.

That gentleman sought no acquaintance. He did not go about the town, nor to any house. He kept apart. But once in the year he went South on a river boat.

Neither Horton nor the little captain discussed their plans with anyone. It would be discovered that Captain Berkley had gone South, and later on it would be discovered that he had returned.

There was little, then, for the Pittsburgh lawyer beyond this general gossip of the countryside. He had seen the legal contract, of record, which Colonel Braxton had drawn up, and on this drive, out to the Berkley farm, he had interviewed the only person who seemed in possession of any collateral fact.

That person was Sylvanus Betts, but what he knew was a cloud rather than a light on the affair. He had come out from his house when the carriage stopped, and stood in the road to talk to the two lawyers.

Betts was a wool buyer in a small way for a local manufacturing concern that wove coarse blankets, and he had endeavored to purchase the few bales of wool that Horton was sending down the river, about the time of the journey from which Cap-

tain Berkley did not return.

He had made an offer, which Horton had refused, and he had followed to the river landing in an effort to obtain the wool. He had raised his offer as Horton was about to take the bales off to the steamer in a rowboat.

But the stubborn manager for Berkley would not sell to him. Betts thought the man had a regular purchaser for the wool he grew, perhaps, at a stipulated price, and did not feel that he was at liberty to dispose of it to another. Besides, as the neighbors said, the careless little captain, when he went on these mysterious excursions, had always to have additional money to get home, and Horton was accustomed to send it by a boat captain, or to ship a few bales of wool to provide the funds.

"You will remember it," Betts said, addressing Colonel Braxton, "for you were on that steamer. Horton nearly lost his life taking the bales of wool out to it. The wash of the steamer overturned his boat. Horton was for some time imprisoned under it. He had to be fished out of the river, with his wool."

"Yes," replied Colonel Braxton. "I remember I was looking on from the deck of the steamer. It was the *Dolly Madison* of Memphis."

"It was," said Betts.

And then he turned about on the Pittsburgh lawyer. He was a big man, bluff and aboveboard with his words.

"You ought to know all about this thing," he said. "It was your client who tricked Berkley. Their crooked agent sold him this land in fee simple, and then made him a deed that conveyed only a life estate. It was a piece of confounded knavery!"

"That, sir," said the attorney, "is a matter with which I have no concern."

"Well," replied Betts, "it's a matter with which God Almighty will have a concern. It's a strange world, sir. No man ever gets any actual benefit out of a wrong. Somehow, in some unexpected manner, the Providence of God evens it."

And so, turning on his heel, he had gone back into his house.

As the carriage went on, the attorney made some apologies in form to Colonel Braxton. He knew nothing of this earlier transaction, he said. He had been recently retained for a specific purpose: to recover the land if Berkley's death could be established. It was purely a legal matter. There was no moral question in it.

Colonel Braxton did not reply.

The man was within the technical ethics of his profession. But human affairs were on a larger plane. There was always a moral right under every legal right if the latter ought to stand. And as the moral right was, so would the legal right be also. The law was to establish justice. There could be no justice in the absence of a moral right. And there seemed to him a strange turn toward a sort of equitable balance in this affair.

If Berkley did not return, Horton, under his contract of record, would hold these lands for seven years. If one disappeared, passed out of human knowledge, he was not thereby accepted by the law as dead. The law presumed a life tenure of seven years, unless the death could be established, either by the finding and identification of the body, or some direct evidence of violence that would result in death, or circumstantial evidence tending to establish the fact of death.

The presumption of life must be overcome.

Men disappeared for various causes. They concealed themselves; they went surreptitiously on a journey. This was a common experience of life; too frequent in its occurrence to be passed over by the law. All this Colonel Braxton had explained to Berkley and his compainion, as a sort of history appertaining to a life estate.

And he recalled now the further details of that day when Horton had brought the little captain in to consult with him about the deception in the purchase deed. It was the annoyance of a suit in chancery, he felt, that had held Berkley back. His unconcern of what came beyond his death was not, for all the man's dapper manner, the controlling motive.

"I am sorry, Horton," he had said, somewhere in that talk, "to limit your inheritance, for you are my heir. But I will not be entangled in an endless lawsuit; I have had enough of that!"

And, strangely, at the words Horton had fallen silent, and the consultation had closed.

Colonel Braxton had assured Berkley that a court of equity would correct the deed, for the evidence of trickery was conspicuous. But he could not assure him that a suit in chancery in the circuit courts of Virginia would not run on. There were too many shifts and subterfuges in the law. One could get a jury trial to an issue. But a suit in chancery might go on for years.

It was the one great wrong about our human devices to do justice—this delay.

In his experiences he had met with many another who, like this man, draw back from going into court to correct some defect in a land title; and who preferred, like Berkley, to suffer the ill he knew rather than the law's delays and all the worry and costs of lawsuits.

And so Colonel Braxton had no very high regard for this Pittsburgh lawyer nor for the mission he was on. But the mystery that lay about the matter puzzled him profoundly. In every direction, at the distance of a single step, the whole affair ended in the dark.

Every detail was in itself a mystery.

Wherefore the strange relation between Berkley and this man Horton? And of what race was the latter? Why had they come here, as though to be out of the world? What were they endeavoring to conceal, to cover up, to escape from? Why these periodic disappearances of Berkley? On what journey did he go, and for what purpose and to what destination? Why had Horton wished to get the legal paper giving him the returns from this estate during Berkley's life?

One might understand why Berkley would make that indenture.

Horton had, in fact, charge of everything, a sort of manager, in every direction, for this careless, swaggering old man. And Horton might wish it, knowing that Berkley was no person to handle practical affairs.

That would be explanation enough if Berkley had returned. But when he had not returned, it bore the aspect of a paper drawn for a forseen event.

And why had he not returned?

That was the culminating mystery!

Every explanation that Colonel Braxton formulated seemed presently to negative itself. Had Berkley gone on some adventure? He was, from every evidence, clearly of that type. But he was old now, coming to the end of life, and surely also coming to the end of such adventures.

But one could not tell.

Sometimes, as the curtain was coming down, such men went out on a last desperate affair; with no hope, with no wish, perhaps, that they would win out of it with the worthless fragment of life.

Or was he dead?

And, if so, had Horton killed him?

The thing looked strange, either way, and in contradiction. The marked attachment of the man to Berkley would negative this last conclusion. Horton was like a brother and

caretaker to him. He moved in every direction apparently with this intent.

Why, then, should he make away, in secret, with him?

And yet, here was this caretaker to gather everything into his own hands. Here was this contract, drawn with a concern to make it legal and to get it of record, like a deed. But under such a paper, on the other hand, the continued life rather than the death of Berkley ought to be his concern, for there was only this life estate to look to.

The mysteries about the thing, in any direction, brought one up against a wall.

The carriage stopped before the house, and Mr. Brewster and Colonel Braxton entered. They saw no one about. But a knocking on the door brought Horton. And again, as always, Colonel Braxton was puzzled by the man. He was big, muscular, and young; in the neighborhood of thirty, one would say; and he was swarthy, like an octoroom. But his features, as I have written, negative that estimate.

He opened the door and stood aside, and they went into the one big room the house contained. The man indicated the empty chairs, as a courtesy to the guests. But he remained standing. His manner, Colonel Braxton thought, was that of a host who does not wish to be familiar rather than any convention of a servant.

Mr. Brewster sat down beside a table, placed his top hat on the floor, and began his interrogation, as in a criminal trial to a hostile witness.

And while the questions volleyed, Colonel Braxton looked about the room. He noted the details carefully and compared them in his memory with the details of the room at his former visit. And several items in that inventory intrigued him: trivial clues about this mystery, and pointing like vague signboards toward its solution.

One was the daguerreotype of a woman, in a simple frame. A young woman, evidently of the race from which Horton himself had come. But of a less rugged type. There was something finer about the face. This picture was on the table. And on the mantel there was a miniature in an oval frame, apparently of Berkley when a mere lad. These were new additions to the detail of the room. And there was a further considerable change about the fireplace.

But Colonel Braxton made no comment. He did not wish to include himself in Mr. Brewster's mission.

That lawyer got little from his interrogation.

The big, inscrutable witness was in no sense hostile. His answers were clear and accurate, and he was frank and plain-spoken, like one willing to tell all he knew about an obscure affair. But when the explanation was ended there was nothing new. Captain Berkley had gone South, as was his custom on occasion and had not returned.

One could not say what had happened to him.

The witness, as on former occasions, had shipped some bales of wool to his regular consignee at Memphis, to be a credit to Captain Berkley when he should call for it. The wool had been received, unbaled, sold, and the credit had not been drawn on. He produced the receipt of that consignee for the wool, and the credit to the account of Captain Berkley.

Brewster looked over the receipt and passed it to Colonel Braxton. Then he put two or three confirmatory queries, and Horton answered them.

"You took Captain Berkley to the boat?"

"Yes."

"And he has not returned?"

"No."

And then the question important to his mission:

"What do you intend to do, sir?"

Horton made a sort of gesture when he answered that, as of one who is asked a foolish and unnecessary question.

"I shall remain here," he said, "and take care of the house and lands, as I have always done. Captain Berkley has entrusted them to me. Shall I fail him in that trust merely because of the fact that he is absent?"

"And if he does not return?"

"I shall remain."

"How long?"

Again Horton made that curious gesture.

"How long sir," he said, "shall a steward remain when he is left behind to care for his master's possessions in a land of strangers?"

"Well," said the attorney, in his crisp, sharp voice, "you might remain for seven years under the law, if Berkley does not turn up."

Horton made a sweeping gesture with his extended arm.

"For seven years then," he said.

It was drawing on toward night. From far down the river the remote echoes of a sound came up. The river boat was turning a bend of the Ohio. And Mr. Brewster must be on his way if he was to reach Pittsburgh.

He took up his top hat and went out with a curt adieu. Horton remained standing by the door. But Colonel Braxton walked with the attorney to the carriage.

Mr. Evert Brewster pronounced there his opinion.

"Old Berkley may have gone somewhere to the dogs, for all we know," he said. "The affair is a mystery beyond me. But one thing is certain: This creature will stick. And I see no way for my clients to eject him.

"The law in these cases of disappearance will not presume death, following, I suppose, the rule laid down by Sir Matthew Hale, who hanged some sailors for the murder of a mate who had disappeared; and afterward the mate turned up."

He made a gesture as of abandonment.

"Unless the death of Berkley should be discovered, I can see this fellow sitting here for his seven years."

He made a courteous bow to Colonel Braxton, and stepped into the carriage.

"I shall direct the driver to return here for you," he said, "and I am obligated to you in every variety of way for your conspicuous courtesy. When you are coming to Pittsburgh, do me the honor of a call upon my service."

And he drove away to the steamer landing.

Colonel Braxton went back past Horton into the house. He paused at the hearth, looking down at the big, empty fireplace where the body of a tree would burn, and the great open throat of the chimney. Then, for a moment, he studied the little miniature of the boy which was sitting on the mantel self.

He went over, after that, to the table near the chair from which Mr. Brewster had so recently got up. And out of the corner of his eye he scrutinized the daguerreotype at his elbow. Here was a new element come into this affair, and how, precisely, had it influenced these mysterious events?

Was there a relation between this woman and Captain William Berkley?

But, if so, why did it appear here only after the man had vanished?

Why had Horton brought it out?

The incident set something in motion in the lawyer's mind. He began to walk about the room. A bed had been set up in a corner. Horton's bed; for through a door, ajar, he could see into the room where Berkley was accustomed to sleep, and it was empty, the bed dismantled. There remained only the wood-

en knobs on the bed frame.

And his vague impression took a certain form.

The aspect of the room had changed; as with a change of occupant a room, subtly and inconspicuously, can c h a n g e. Heretofore, it had been a room for Berkley. It was now a room for Horton!

The insistence of this fact disquieted the man.

The thing was a seizure of possession. And Colonel Braxton felt that it was based on something irrevocable and permanent. Did Horton know, then, that Berkley would not return?

When Colonel Braxton had come back into the house Horton had gone outside. He had made some trivial explanation: there was a chill in the air at evening, and he would find some bits of wood for a little fire. One could not say when the driver would return with the carriage from the river. The boat was coming up at some distance below the landing and there were always a variety of delays in an embarkation. Night might be on the way when the carriage returned.

Colonel Braxton was alone in the room.

And the impressions that he assembled did not reassure him. The daguerreotype of the woman on the table was the most disturbing. If Horton were intriguing for a woman, anything might have happened. Women notoriously complicated a n y mystery. A man enamored of a woman might do any sort of thing. That lure overrode fidelity, honor, every law. The highest endeavors of the soul went with it, and the most abominable betrayals.

Who was this woman, and what did she here?

Horton came in then with some bits of wood, and started to kindle a little flame on the hearth. And again Colonel Braxton's attention was centered on this fireplace. It presented a marked change from his earlier memory of it.

It was a great, open fireplace with an immense throat of a chimney, in which one could have burned an ox to ashes. It had stood with andirons on which cuts of beechwood that a man could hardy carry in were consumed. The sort of old fireplace that the early men built to heat their houses when the snowstorms raged and the timber cracked in the low temperature of midnight.

Colonel Braxton recalled it precisely as it was when he had been here the last time. Now it was cleaned out; the great andirons were gone, and Hor-

ton was kindling a little flame of chips and stove wood.

Colonel Braxton put a query along the line of his impressions:

"Captain Berkley was not in rugged health?"

And Horton, stooping over the fire remarked:

"He was not. He had attacks of the heart."

His tenure of life was uncertain then?"

"Yes."

"You did not expect him to live long?"

"No."

"Not seven years?"

Colonel Braxton shot the query, as though to take the man unguarded.

But it failed. Horton gave no evidence of any visible concern. He replied slowly in a deeper voice:

"Life and death are in God's hand. One may live long or die early as He wills."

Colonel Braxton deflected his interrogation:

"Captain Berkley had a dread of being buried in the earth."

The man looked up from the fire.

"He said that to you?"

"Yes," replied Colonel Braxton, "more than once he said it. One could laugh at death, he said, if one had not to lie still forever in the earth, if one could be exposed to the vultures, or go out, like the dead Vikings, on a sinking ship, or be burned on a great funeral pyre."

And again he looked closely at the man kindling his little flame in the vast fireplace.

But that one replied with equanimity:

"It was a strange feeling. But there was a deep horror in it to Captain Berkley. To lie forever in one place was an idea that he could not bear. He had a restless spirit; to move; to change—motion of some sort was what he longed for, even after death."

"Precisely," said Coloned Braxton; "the vultures and the water move, and the fire . . . the flames and the smoke go up, and the sparks fly heavenward. There would be in the idea something of the freedom of a thing adventuring on, to a restless spirit."

And again Colonel Braxton put a question from another quarter:

"When you urged Berkley to go to law about this deed, he replied that he had had enough of lawsuits, and you were silent. Why were you silent at that answer, Horton?"

The man turned about, where he was kneeling on the hearth.

"I of all persons could not urge a lawsuit on him."

Horton spoke slowly, softly, but there was an upheaval of emotion under the restraint.

Colonel Braxton put out his hand and took up the daguerreotype from the table.

"Did Captain Berkley care for this woman?"

It was some moments before Horton, on his knees in the great fireplace, endeavored to reply, as though he required that interval for control.

"He cared nothing for her."

There came a strange paroxysm of emotion over Horton's face.

"Nothing?" echoed Colonel Braxton.

"Nothing!" replied the man.

The suppressed emotion broke out in Horton's answer.

Colonel Braxton was profoundly puzzled. He was in the dark, and he moved softly.

"And this other," he said, indicating the miniature above the fireplace. "Is it Captain Berkley in his youth?"

"No."

Colonel Braxton paused, for the dark was now deepened.

"What is the equity," he said, "between this woman and this youth?"

"No equity," replied Horton, "in the affairs of men. But in the vast adjustment of God, a pressing and eternal equity."

"On what man?" said the Colonel.

"On me!" replied Horton. "And I will adjust it at any cost!"

"At any cost?" said Colonel Braxton.

"At any cost," replied the man.

"Even murder?" said Colonel Braxton.

There came a wrenching, contorted energy into Horton's voice.

"Even murder," he said; "if that were a part of the cost."

"And so," continued Colonel Braxton, "you have laid every plan for this adjustment; got everything here into your own hands to do it . . . at any cost, as you say it, Horton; at the cost of a seven years' tenure if it cannot be shown that Captain Berkley is dead?"

"Yes," cried the man, his voice escaping, in its emotion, out of leash. "Have I not said it? At any cost! And may the Lord God destroy me if I do a less thing!"

The man was kneeling on the hearth in the great throat of the chimney, near the flames of the little fire that he had kindled. Twilight had fallen. Shadows were gathering in the room.

And Colonel Braxton put another query:

"Why did Berkley go on these journeys?"

"It was only to see the South,"

replied Horton. "It was his native country. He was sometimes homesick to see it."

Colonel Braxton replaced the picture of the woman on the table. He sat down.

"And this last journey," he said; "do you expect him to return from it?"

"He has always returned from his journeys," said Horton.

"He will not return from this one."

"Why not?"

"Because he never went on it," replied Colonel Braxton.

There was utter silence in the room. The attorney sat beside the table looking into the great fireplace, now empty, save for the man who had kindled the little fire of chips and stove wood on the vast hearth. This man in his crouched attitude seemed distorted and grotesque in his big shadowy outline. The voice, when it replied, was like a voice issuing from a shadow.

"You mean he is here?" it said.

For a moment the lawyer did not reply. He seemed to study the great fireplace, in which an ox could have been burned to smoke and ashes, butchered and undressed, on the big andirons, now removed from where they had formerly stood on the wide stone hearth.

"At any rate, Horton," he said, "your design in this matter rescued Berkley from one thing he feared—the fear of the earth over him. He will not lie with the earth over him . . . nor did he go to the vultures . . . what was it that he said would make him laugh at death? To be burned on a great funeral pyre of wood and spices, or to go out to set, like a dead Viking, in a sinking ship. . . . The great fireplace is empty, Horton. . . . It is empty! Where are the big andirons that used to stand in it? . . . Where have they gone, Horton?"

The man came out of the throat of the chimney and stood up on the hearth beside the mantel. He bulked big in the twilight, one side of him faintly illumined by the fire.

"Do you pry into this thing," he said, "for yourself or to the gain of another?"

"For myself," replied Colonel Braxton. "For myself only and the adjustment of God's justice. I interrogate you for the gain of no man."

And his voice went on its prolonged key like a refrain:

"Where is the bed cord, Horton? Berkley's bed is stripped to the knobs on the wooden frame. . . . Where is the bed cord?"

The big man standing on the hearth, the half of him in shadow, the half of him lighted by the fire, did not reply.

And Colonel Braxton's voice went on in its deep rhythmic intonation, like the recurring repetitions of a chant:

"And that seventh wool bale! Where is it, Horton? . . . Where is that other wool bale?"

He put out his hand and touched the paper on the table: the receipt of the consignee at Memphis for the wool shipment; the receipt that Horton had shown to the Pittsburgh lawyer.

"That paper acknowledged the receipt of *six* bales; and you had *seven* bales on the steamboat landing. Seven! Horton, Sylvanus Betts tried to buy them from you. Seven! He counted seven. . . . Where is that other wool bale?"

The big, even, relentless voice went on:

"Look at me, Horton. Where is that other wool bale?—the lost one, the seventh one; the one that was bound so securely with the bed cord. The one that had the two heavy andirons in it, to make it sink . . . the one that contained the dead body of Captain Berkley? . . . Did you kill him?"

The man, bulking big, indefinite, against the background of the huge fireplace, laughed. It was like no other human laughter. It was like the laughter of a jinni, the laughter of a dominating spirit at a thing too utterly incredible for any other form of answer.

"I kill him! When to gain him an hour of life I would have bled out every blood drop in my body!"

The laughter, guttural, weird, was a sort of agony.

Then, with a great effort, he got back his equanimity. He took a step forward from the shadow of the hearth. He looked down at the lawyer.

"I will tell you," he said, "and with the knowledge you shall take the obligation. And if the adjustment of God's justice is disturbed by what I tell you, it shall be you and not I who must answer to Him!"

There was a moment's silence and he went on:

"A woman and a little boy, fleeing out of Mexico, at war, came into Louisiana. They were a blend of Spanish and peon, and counting on the color of that blend, a slave trader seized them at the border and offered them on the block at New Orleans. Captain Berkley, returning also from that war, passing, heard their protestations, and knew that they spoke the truth, for he had a knowledge of these

people to the south.

"He protested against the outrage. There were high words. But he was a man of spirit, and once into a thing he did not give way. He put up a bond; carried the woman and child to his estate. The slave trader raised his fellows and went into the courts, and this gallant gentleman went with him. The case went on, bitter and shunted from court to court for years. It became famous and it cost a fortune. It ate up like a plague everything that Captain Berkley had.

"And not that only. It turned his people and his friends against him. It put him in the position of fighting against an institution upon which they believed their civilization rested. The wrong of this particular case was lost in the vast effect of its precedent, if it should be legally established. But against all this Captain Berkley stood with the courage of the angels.

"The case went on for years—for twenty years. The woman died, happy, free. The boy grew up, and finally the case was won. But Captain Berkley was a pauper and an outcast. Even his sister, the only living member of his family would not speak to him.

"And so, rejected of his people and denuded of his inheritance, he came here. . . . I, only, remained to him. The son of the woman he had saved from slavery. . . . You know the rest."

There was a long silence before Colonel Braxton spoke.

"Not all of it," he said.

"No," replied the man, not all of it, for things changed. Captain Berkley's sister and her husband died, leaving a son with nothing . . . he is there in that miniature on the mantel. And I must do for him what Captain Berkley did for me . . . in secret for him what was done openly for me. . . .

"For Captain Berkley, after they had turned against him, would not permit me to mention to him any member of his family. And so I got the property into my hands, and so I would have managed, even against these Pittsburgh thieves with their crooked deed, if Captain Berkley had lived on."

The man stopped. Then, with a gesture as of abandonment, he continued:

"But he died. I found him dead in that chair."

Again he paused.

"And so, I did the only thing I could do to gain a little time on these Pittsburgh thieves; time to earn the money to get back Captain Berkley's estate in the South for that nephew yonder on the mantel, the last of

his blood; and the image, like a reincarnation, of him."

There came a sudden energy into his voice. He seemed to advance on Colonel Braxton, although he did not move.

"You have searched it out to the last detail. And you are right. I put the body into a bale of wool, with the andirons to make weight, I bound it with the bed cord, and when I took the bales off to the steamer I overturned the boat and sank it. . . . and so . . ."

His voice echoed through the empty room.

"I saved the dead man from the earth he dreaded, and I gained my seven years on the thieves. . . . All hidden . . . covered from every man but you; you alone have cunningly ferreted it all out. . . . And the injustice that results be on you!"

Colonel Braxton made a sweeping gesture as of one who rejects an obligation.

"It shall not be on me" he said.

There was the sound of a carriage on the road outside—the carriage returning from the river boat. And the lawyer rose.

"Horton," he continued, "it shall not be on me." And his voice was balanced—even and level like a sheet of light.

"For I have learned one thing —one thing in a long experience of life—I have learned to keep silent and to stand aside when the inscrutable Providence of God is moving to the adjustment of some troubled matter in the affairs of men!"

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the mark

by John Krill

I'm a strong guy. The banners in front of the side show tent prove it. A real strong guy. I toss the iron around on the bally stand and get the women goggle-eyed over the way my muscles lump up under the strain of a 200-pound press or a 300-pound clean-and-jerk. I've got lots of tolerance for the average henpecked, puny citizen. But I get good and hot when somebody tries to knock me off! Me, Terrifo! The world's strongest man as the billboards say.

What makes me worry about being knocked off ain't that I'm scared of dying. It's because of Annie Conda. She's the pretty little snake charmer I'm awful in love with. "Come, Annie," I said to her as I removed the rock python from around her neck so's I could kiss those luscious lips that taste like strawberries out of season. "Come. Marry me. Let me take you away from this smelly circus."

Annie's got her hair done up in lots of thin ropes with fake snake heads tied on the ends. Made her look like a character named Medusa, Johnson the

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Strange things can happen when a circus strongman is in love, particularly when the object of his affection is as attractive—in so many ways— as Annie Conda admittedly is. . . He has far more to contend with than merely a jealous rock python, and the normal hazards of circus life! Far, far more than just that. . . .

---

circus manager told me. Hellva looking broad she musta been. But Annie only sigher, and I had to look quick to see if it wasn't that damn cold python hissing at me.

"Terry," she lays that sweet head against my 54-inch chest and my heart starts sending out drum messages, "I'm not sure I love you. Maybe you say you love me 'cause Uncle Stoneyard died and left me twenty grand."

I jerk back from her. Such a thought never even entered my mind. "But I don't want the dough, my sweet," I whisper yearningly. "I only want you. The dough will come in handy merely to pay off the diaper serviceman 'cause you'll be so busy raising kids you won't have time to wash 'em yourself."

Her nice wide, blue eyes grow wider and bluer and she pats them lousy snaky locks tenderly with a hand you immediately know is refined 'cause it's so nice and clean. She parks against me again and says, "Oh, Terry! You say the nicest things."

Her freckled face turns a rose-red, the kind you find on them expensive extra-fancy high-horse, I mean hybrid roses, as lips meet lips in what is known the world over as ecstasy. The kiss don't go the limit 'cause I feel something icy crawling up my leg. I bust the clinch and am about to wrap that clammy reptile once for all around a tent prop.

"Don't Terry!" Annie is pleading for the ugly thing's life.

I give in, saying, "Any thing that jealous oughta be dead." It gives me what's known as a sibilant hiss as I drop it.

A snake charmer's flute sounded crazily from the midway. "Oh! It's my cue! I must hurry." Annie snatched up the snake and sped out of the tent. I sighed as I watched the straight trim back, the flashing legs enclosed in tights, the smooth bare arms swinging. I sighed and sighed.

But I wasn't worried about my chances. Sure I had rivals. Morty Clottz who ran the shooting gallery concession was one. The other was The Great Arnaldo, a trapeze artist. Like I say, I was not worried. I was courting Annie for over a year. They just got interested in her right after her uncle died. I had the inside track with her.

Something smacks me alongside of the head as I follow Annie with my eyes. I come to in the emergency tent. The doc is leaning over me. From his breath I know he had sauerkraut and weiners with beer for dinner.

"S'matter?" I demand, trying to get up. I fall down.

"Stay down, stupid," the doc

snaps at me. "You was shot at. Lucky the bullet glanced off your thick skull."

Morty Clottz from the shooting gallery ran up and fell on me in an embrace of relief. "You're alive! You're alive!" he yells in what is known as a paroxym of joy. His dirty finger strokes the bloody furrow left by the bullet along my temple.

"Hah," snaps Doc Biddle sharply, with a genteel belch, "you didn't succeed with a rifle, Morty. So you figger a infection from a dirty finger might succeed where a bullet didn't."

"What a horrible, horrible idea!" Morty moans and tears film his greasy brown eyes. "Terrifo is my friend. We love the same girl together. Why would I want to do him in?"

Doc Biddle coughs and his paunch goes up and down like what is known as consomme in fancy beaneries, "Why, indeed, Clottz?" he says with contempt. "With Terrifo out of the way, you're that much nearer to marrying Anna Conda and her twenty grand."

My mind is no longer dazed. Quickly it grasps the hellish situation. Strength flows back into my powerful muscles. My arm shoots out and locks on Clottz's scrawny neck. I am about to snap it like a pretzel when my darling rushes in. In the delight at seeing her, I remove my hand from Clottz' neck so's I can place it on hers.

She presses her lips to mine and the damned python stares me right in the eye from her shoulder and sticks its forked tongue out at me insultingly. I wait for the razzberry to follow and suddenly remember reptiles ain't hep to that art. "Are you all right, Terry? Are you all right?" she sobs.

"Yeah," I tell her and wish Clottz'd sharpen up his aim by shooting at that damned snake that insisted on getting between me and my honey.

Clottz is starting to whine and shake. "Y'got me wrong. You got me wrong, pal."

"Prove it, ya reptile in love with a snake charmer." Doc sure is good with what is known as quips.

My mounting rage climbs some more. I'm not one to stand idly by while somebody tries to cash my chips in for me. I am about to clamp a deadly hold on Clottz' neck again when he pipes up, "I can prove it! The Great Arnaldo was shooting with the yokels when my friend Terrifo was laid low with a shot. Arnaldo done it. He's in love with the twenty-gran- - - I mean with Annie, too."

Remorse flows like a mighty river in my breast as I see I al-

most did Clottz a mortal wrong by busting his neck. That was my big fault tripping over conclusions. "Morty," I choke back my feelings, "I'm truly sorry. You are my friend. Will you shake?"

He's a sport. "Of course, Terrifo," and he shakes. Annie gives him a warm smile and I get a feeling I did the wrong thing.

The wind shifts and Johnson, the manager of Mahem's Great Circus, comes trotting in. A foul smell comes in with him. For a moment we suspect him, but we quickly realize it's from the animal tent. Johnson only smells when it comes to giving us raises in pay. But enough of these homely character touches.

"What's going on here?" he roars with a voice that'd match my muscles swell. He'd a dried up shrimp, knock-kneed, with a necktie he'd worn everyday for two years. His mouth is full of gold and he's fond of flashing a 14 carat gold smile at the cooch dancers.

"Attempted murder," snaps Doc Biddle, and jiggled like what I told you was consomme as he coughed.

"Who'd ya try t'murder, Terrifo? Yer fired."

Because I'm mentally as well as physically superior to the average citizen, I forebore from pulling him apart. "You've got it all wrong," I say with dignity. The snake on Annie's shoulder lets out a loud hiss and Johnson leaps back four yards. I almost liked it.

Doc brings him up to date. Johnson's dried-up face dries up some more. "Get Arnaldo in here!" he orders. Nobody stirs. So he hauls out himself. Soon he comes back while I'm still telling Annie I'm okay. Arnaldo is with him. He's what is known as a dark, sinister Latin type. Tall, lithe, handsome and always broke.

I am about to seize the murderous rascal by the throat only Annie throws herself between us. "Give him a chance to speak," she begs. Love of her conquers the raging anger within me.

"Speak!" I thunder at the trapeze artist.

"Eet ees beeg meestek," he answers me softly, hoping by this strategy to soothe my savage breast. "I should mak aim lettle more to thee left. Ees mos' unfortunate accident. Sorree! Sorree!"

I am about to agree it's all a mistake when Doc Biddle pops up, "A bit more to the left would have sent the bullet where the brain is supposed to be."

My agile brain seizes the implication and I grab the Latin

by the throat. "Pleez, m'sieu! You 'ave take wrong meaning. I am not well acquaint' wiz your tongue. Was truly accident."

Who am I to take an innocent man's life? "Don't let it happen again," I grit out from between clenched teeth. "Now, git t'hell out. All of you, except Annie." They all blow. I grab the damn snake from her shoulders and toss it out. "You too!" I yell. Then I masterfully crush her to me. Something cold starts winding up my leg as the kiss goes three minutes. The damn snake was back.

That evening in the crowded meal tent the sound of chomping jaws sounded like gentle wavelets slapping against rocks. I got up and flushing a burning red, announced: "Dear friends! I wish to say that Anna Conda and I will be married in exactly thirty days. Thank you." There was a brief silence, then a wild applause. I glanced at Annie. She was biting her lower lip demurely. A deep tenderness filled me. Then I saw she was tossing scraps to the damn snake under the table. Suddenly I wondered if maybe she didn't love that reptile more than me.

Like they say in romances, little did I know what fate held for me. And I didn't have to wait long to find out. Me and Annie were closer together than miser with his money. Then fate made the first evil pass at me.

You know how I stand in a leopard skin in the big ring while the trapeze artists make with their death-defying acts under the big top. Well, this night I'm leaning against the pole from which the wires are strung to light the tent. My usual position during each and every performance as us circus people say.

I'm watching The Great Arnaldo walking the tight-rope. Only it's a steel cable. I'm hoping he falls off and busts his—well not exactly his neck. He's been making passes at Annie while I'm busy with my public. As he's mincing down the middle of the cable, a voice hollers, "Hey, Terrifo! Plug in that cord."

Thinking it's for the colored spot light, I plug it in. The Great Arnaldo screams suddenly and falls. A blue flash arcs out as he leaves the cable. He sure is dead when we pick him up. Too bad I think. Suddenly I become afraid of myself. Did he fall because I was wishing so hard he would?

Then a pistol a foot long is scratching my surprised nose. I follow its length to Johnson's dried prune face. "Git them paws up, killer!" His lips is

working something fierce and the gold teeth show like a dentist's display case.

"What's this?" I ask calmly. "You don't mean my wishing made him lose balance and fall to his death do you?"

"Don't get funny! I saw you plug in that cord. The end was spliced to Arnaldo's cable."

Suddenly Annie appeared. She squeezed in between the old fool with the cannon and me. The snake on her shoulders raised its head to observe Johnson better. He yells and hops back like he was a choice morsel the reptile was ready to swallow.

Then Doc Biddle says in disgust, "Hell, Johnson, act yer age. I was behind Terrifo when somebody yells out for him to plug in the cord. The muscle-brain did it without question. It ain't his fault. He's innocent by reason to sheer incomprehensibility."

"You said it, Doc," I stated positively, pretending to understand the medical term.

Cops came in and questioned me. Doc. backed me up. No. I didn't recognize the voice. Didn't know who told me to put in the plug. They let me go. Johnson hired a private eye to travel with the circus in a effort to solve the murder.

A week later I went to a small town on the coast where banana boats came in with their cargoes from South America. I wanted to get my Annie a present. And I knew exactly what she'd like. A few inquiries among the sailors and I had what I wanted. I put it in a suitcase. One of them made a curious circling motion around his ear with a finger and said, "He musta been drinking too much green banana juice. If I brought that home to my girl friend she'd sprout goose feathers'.'

Who meets me by chance as they say, just outside of the animal tent? My friend of the shooting concession, M o r t y Clottz. It was bean time and everybody was exercising their molars in the cook tent. I can hear the cats yawning and growling. The bulls are flapping their big ears and swinging their trunks. Everything smells like hell, as it should when all the animals are in good shape.

Clottz grabs me by the arm. "Come quick!" he screams. "Annie is in danger." He pulls me and the suitcase down the aisle with the Wagon cages holding the hippos and sea lions. Then past the sadly shedding camels who stink worse than goats. At the end of the bull lines are the monkey cages. Morty stops there.

He points through the bars of an empty cage. My breath

halts in my throat. In a corner is a pile of cloth. My heart starts to ache as I recognize my Annie's green tights. The cage belongs to the meanest and biggest chimpanzee ever captured. Compared it in strength, even I humbly admit it's a bit stronger than me.

I jump through the open door forgetting I still held the suitcase with Annie's present. Running to the corner, I snatch up the tights and a sob of relief bursts from my tortured breast. There ain't no rips or blood like there'd be if the chimp had gotten hold of her.

Morty slams the steel door shut and locks it. I stand there wondering if he's gone out of his mind from sheer joy at knowing that Annie must be safe. He starts yelling something I don't like the sound of. With all the animals roaring and screaming there he ain't scared of being heard.

"Lemme out, ya damn fool," I command. "I want to give Annie her tights back. Howinell did the chimp swipe 'em from her?"

"Ya dope, I swiped them," Morty howls doubled over with shallow humor. "Your clothes'll be in the corner next. Then I won't have any rivals for Annie's hand. I'm fixing you like I fixed Arnaldo."

"You mean you wired the tight-rope, then yelled for me to plug in the cord?"

"What do you think, Terrifo? I missed you with the rifle, but I got you now."

I was what is known as appalled by Morty's words. Nobly I fought down the glimmering suspicion that maybe it didn't pay to have faith in my fellow man. "Morty," I say sadly but firmly to him, "I'm afraid I'll have to tell the cops on you, friend or no friend."

For some reason this only makes him laugh louder. Weak from the low comedy he staggers to the enclosed runway between my cage and the adjoining one. "When I marry Annie," he chokes out, "I'll buy you a fine tombstone out of the twenny-t'ousand bucks that go with her."

He's raising the sliding door and I come nearer to see what he's got in mind. I grasp the situation with the speed of lightning when the mean and ugly chimp in the other cage strolls up to see what's going on.

I see at once that for some obscure reason the ape regards me with what is known as critical disfavor. Maybe it's on account I ain't got no fleas for him to pick off me. I start speaking to him in a chummy voice like one pal speaking to another. He bares his banana choppers at

me and comes at me with a leap and a snarl. "Get back," I snap and kick him solidly in the chest. In many a "Hey Rube" brawl such kicks proved mortal to the yokels.

So I stand back to watch the ape crumble to the sawdust. That was what is known as a tactical error. Even great generals pull them. The ape didn't go down. Seems like he got madder and springier. Next thing I knew, I was dashing madly around the cage with him after me. I hoped it would get dizzy from running round and round and quit. But not being used to running in circles I got dizzy and fell first. The ape nailed me while Morty screamed with delight.

I get a scissors-hold across the hairy midriff. The ape counters with some snappy tothwork and I let go. My hand falls on the suitcase just as it is about to charge again. I know that victory is mine. Quickly I open the suitcase. The raging ape takes one gawk at what I got for Annie and subsides into a whimpering, harmless hulk as the two banana pythons start sliding out of the suitcase. Now the damned ape suddenly runs over to me making palsy-walsy sounds and crouches down by me for protection.

Morty screams curses. "Wait!" he yells. "I'm gonna git one of my rifles and do the job right." He turns to run.

"Just a minute!" a voice orders. A guy steps out from behind a wagon. He's got a rod pointing at my ex-friend. "I heard you admit wiring Arnaldo's cable and trying to shoot Terrifo so's you'd have a clear field with Annie."

"Who're you?" Morty yells.

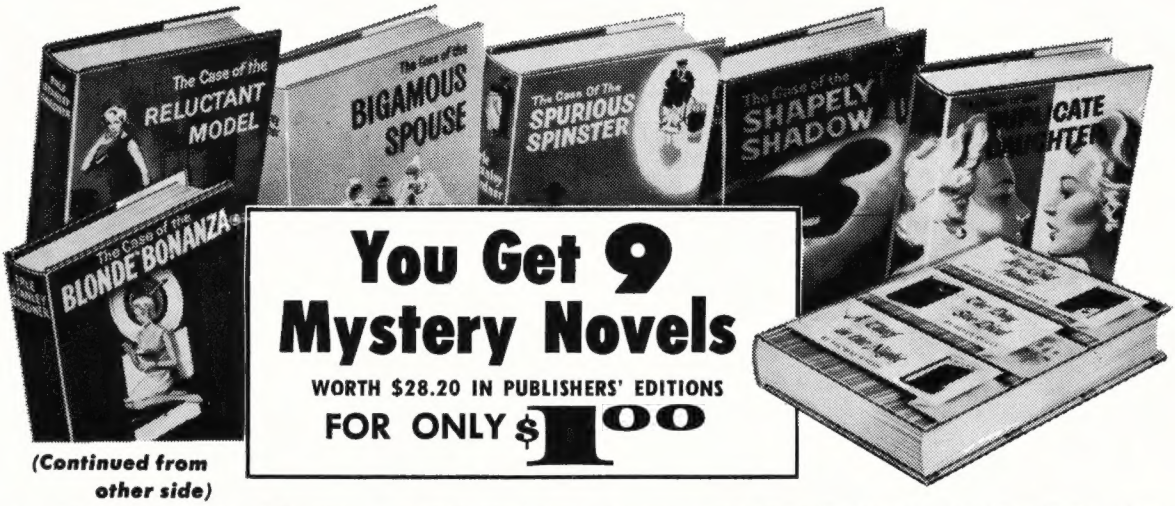
"I'm the private eye Johnson hired."

Well, they keep me in that cage until the paddy wagon comes and hauls Morty Clottz away. I was so mad I'd have beat him to what is known as a pulp.

Annie arrives and waits until they open the cage to let me out. "Let's put a stop to all this jealousy, honey," she whispers. "Let's get married right now."

"Darling," I say from what is known as a full heart. I draw her to me. I press a lingering kiss on those luscious lips.

Something cold starts entwining itself up my leg. But I no longer care.



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